He Who Pours Out Vengeance

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/871298.

Rating:	Teen And Up Audiences
Archive Warning:	Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings
Category:	Multi
Fandom:	Hannibal (TV)
Relationships:	Will Graham & Hannibal Lecter, Alana Bloom/Will Graham, Alana Bloom/Hannibal Lecter
Characters:	Will Graham, Hannibal Lecter, Alana Bloom, Jack Crawford, Beverly Katz, Dr. Chilton, Jimmy Price, Brian Zeller
Additional Tags:	Post-Season/Series, Drug Use, Cannibalism, Canon-Typical Violence, Mental Institutions, Emotional Manipulation
Language:	English
Series:	Part 1 of The Better Angels
Collections:	These Fics Deserve The World, International Fanworks Day 2022 - Classic Fic Recs, Read_this_next
Stats:	Published: 2013-07-05 Completed: 2014-03-16 Words: 148,808 Chapters: 26/26

He Who Pours Out Vengeance

by Underground

Summary

Post-Savoureux. Will fights back.

Notes

This is basically a 'I-need-more-Hannibal-now-so-I-will-just-write-what-happens-next' fic. A note for those avoiding spoilers: I've incorporated some of the information Bryan Fuller dropped in his interviews re: season 2 plans, but 99% of this is my own rampant speculation.

The title is from 'The Count of Monte Cristo'.

- Translation into Français available: Celui qui verse la vengeance by noclue_noidea
- Translation into Русский available: Упивающийся мщением by Tinumbra

Chapter 1

When he first wakes up, he doesn't remember. His past is a haze. His present is a trap. He thinks this hospital is the other hospital and they are treating him for a fever; he even asks the nurse if Georgia Madchen is well enough for visits. Beyond his window's sterile shades a shadow passes. He assumes it is Dr. Lecter bringing him chicken soup again. But the shadow is one of the guards stationed outside his door. And Dr. Lecter…

Like a monolith Jack looms over him, mouth thin, wary eyes searching his face and body for signs of illness, signs of madness. They come to rest on Will's arm, the bandage there.

"You shot me," Will says.

"You escaped from lockup." Jack's voice is sturdy. He offers no apologies. "You stole an ambulance. You remember stealing an ambulance?"

Red and blue flashing lights filter through the haze of Will's mind. He nods. He also offers no apologies. "I had to find out who he was. The real copycat."

Jack deflates. He had thought this kind of talk would disappear with Will's illness. Will knows how he sounds, and he knows how Jack thinks he sounds, but nothing could be more important than telling him the truth.

His voice thrums with a perverse excitement. "*I found him*."

Jack sighs, humoring him for old times' sake. "The copycat?"

"Dr. Hannibal Lecter."

Jack rubs his face and says nothing.

"Think about it, Jack. He has detailed knowledge of the cases. He was there in Minnesota. He was a surgeon, he has anatomical knowledge, and…he knew me. He *knew* what was happening to me, but he didn't want me to see. He's been playing us since the beginning. He's been playing you—"

"Enough," Jack booms, and the walls seem to shake. "You kidnapped Dr. Lecter at gunpoint. You tried to shoot him. You should be glad he isn't pressing charges."

Will starts to laugh, high-pitched, flirting with hysteria.

Jack cringes. "Look, Will. You've been very sick. You're still confused. Let the doctors here do their work and we'll talk when you're clearer."

Will stops laughing. “I *am* clear. I’m clearer than I’ve been in months. Now that I’m not under the *gentle* care of Dr. Lecter, I see everything.”

“You killed five people,” Jack says, quietly. “I am operating under the assumption, the fervent hope, that you didn’t know what you were doing. But you killed those people, Will. Now, you don’t want to face that, and I don’t blame you. But Dr. Lecter is a good man. He feels he let you down. He sat with you every day while you were under.”

Will shudders.

“Don’t drag him into this,” Jack finishes.

Will pins Jack with his eyes. He knows how pathetic he must look, gaunt and gray-skinned in this hospital bed. He knows Jack feels responsible for putting him there, not just for the gunshot wound, but for all of it. He can feel Jack’s guilt like a third person in the room with them.

“Do me this one favor,” he whispers. “Just look into him for me. I’m not asking you to believe, Jack. All I’m asking you to do is look.”

Jack is conflicted. Will presses on.

“Everything I’ve done for you. All the people I’ve caught. Just catch this one for me. That’s the least you can do.”

Two weeks later, the IVs come out. The doctors have declared him well enough for transfer. No handcuffs this time: they strap him down on a gurney, load him into a van like a piece of heavy furniture, and within the hour he is under the care of Dr. Chilton at the Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane.

“Mr. Graham,” he says, nodding as the orderlies roll the gurney past him. He is fifteen pounds lighter than when Will last saw him, and there is a new jumpiness in his beady eyes. “It’s time for that special visit you promised me.”

Will sleeps those first few days. He is still recovering, or so he tells himself. He would rather be hazy than have to think about what it means to be here, in this place, surrounded by the very killers he caught, the people whose thoughts he lived and breathed. Even now he can feel their violent fantasies oozing through the bars of his cell, seeking to infect him. Chilton comes to see him every day, an eager light in his eyes, brandishing a clipboard with the full battery of psychopathology tests. Will ignores his questions. He lies on his mortuary slab of a bed with his eyes closed and lets his mind paint him pictures of Wolf Trap. Dr. Chilton makes his first diagnosis and the next day the orderly brings a tab of Celexa with Will’s breakfast, and watches him with gentle unblinking eyes until he swallows it.

Alana visits him. Her eyes are full of disappointment. He asks her how Jack is coming with the investigation and she doesn't know what he means.

"He's going through all the evidence," she says hesitantly. "They're conducting door-to-door interviews in Wolf Trap—"

"Not me!" Will barks, annoyed. "I know he's investigating *me*. But what about Dr. Lecter?"

Alana shuts her eyes. "What about him?"

"*Alana*—"

She opens her eyes, suddenly steely. "Hannibal isn't to blame for what happened to you." Will can hear in her voice that this speech is rehearsed. "Any more than Jack is to blame, or I am. Which is to say, Hannibal is very much to blame. He had a responsibility to you and he didn't help you. He—well, he should have caught the encephalitis, there were neurological symptoms he could have noticed. He feels terrible for what happened, Will. He's still reeling from it. It's been a blow."

Will leaps off his bed so quickly that her shoulders jump in alarm. "Please tell me you're not seeing him alone."

"He was my mentor at Johns Hopkins," she says, simply.

Will runs his hands through his hair over and over. "He killed Abigail. He planted evidence in my house, knowing I would be too—too *out of my mind* to understand what was happening. And I'm sure you're right, Alana. He should have seen the encephalitis. A psychiatrist of his caliber, with his medical background—how could he miss it? Unless he didn't miss it. Unless he knew all this time exactly what was wrong with me, only he did everything in his power to keep it from me. For weeks he advised me not to get a brain scan, and when I did, he murdered my neurologist. Dr. Sutcliffe must've known about the encephalitis, he knew, and he wanted to tell me, and Dr. Lecter couldn't have that, oh no, because then the game would be over, and if there's anything Lecter wants, it's that the game should never end. Dr. Sutcliffe had the power to take Lecter's toys away, so Lecter killed him. Yes," Will nods to himself, triumphant, "yes, that's what happened."

Alana just looks at him.

The triumph bleeds out. "You don't believe me," he says.

"I believe *in* you. You understand how other people think, Will. All that perception, all that insight, you have to turn it around, point it at yourself and eventually you'll understand why you're thinking this way. Why these delusions are more comforting to you than the truth."

Will shakes his head. "They're not delusions."

“I *know* Hannibal. He couldn’t do any of the things you’re accusing him of.”

He looks at her set face, her stalwart expression. That’s the problem with Alana. She is so heartbreakingly *loyal*. He says:

“Then you don’t know him as well as you think you do.”

After that, she refuses to discuss Hannibal with him. She speaks to him of Jack, of his case, of the need to find a lawyer with a good grasp of mental health law. He asks her questions about the dogs, advises her on what to feed them, how best to get them to sleep through the night. They don’t talk about their kiss, but it hovers between them, poisons their conversations in much the same way Hannibal does.

He has no one to talk to about Hannibal Lecter, so he builds the case inside his mind, slowly and methodically. He sits on his bed and doesn’t move for hours, his eyes straight ahead, his fingers laced for prayer. The pendulum swings. He is Hannibal Lecter, arranging the bodies with the same meticulous flair that he uses in his speech, his dress, his work and his cooking. Cassie Boyle impaled on a severed stag head, left in a field like a buffet for the crows. Marissa Schuur mounted in the cabin, a crucifixion presented for Abigail to find. Dr. Sutcliffe unrecognizable, not a Glasgow Smile so much as a Glasgow Scream. Georgia Madchen, ingeniously immolated in her glass coffin. And Abigail…God knows what happened to Abigail. Hannibal took other people’s methods and improved on them, with the discipline of a scientist, with the vision of an artist. Yes, the artist metaphor was the more apt. Hannibal created his work for an audience, an audience of one: for Will, the only person with the ability to see him, to understand. And it is easy, so easy now for Will to understand him, and it only gets easier as the pendulum swings, as the days wear on.

Chilton begins to voice the opinion that Will is experiencing periods of catatonia.

Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Hannibal pays Will a visit at the Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane.

Chapter Notes

The beginning of this chapter will feel familiar...

Finally Hannibal comes. “Hello, Will,” he says, conversationally.

Will doesn’t turn immediately. He prepares himself. He has been waiting for this moment. On the bad days, the dark days, he has been living only for this moment.

He stands up and walks to the bars. He looks Hannibal right in the eye and echoes his greeting. Hannibal smiles at him in a way that Hannibal has never smiled at him before, and Will feels a rush of purest joy.

Then Hannibal puts the smile away, as if returning a scalpel to its tray. “How are you feeling?”

“Great,” Will says, not sarcastically.

“You look better. I’ve spoken to your doctors and they are hopeful you will make a substantial recovery, possibly even a complete return to health.”

“I’m well on my way,” Will says. It comes out sounding like a taunt.

“Are you experiencing any trouble sleeping?” Hannibal asks.

Will raises his eyebrows. “Do I have trouble sleeping inside the Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane? No.” He smiles, almost bouncing on his heels.

“No sleepwalking? No hallucinations?”

“No.”

Hannibal looks faintly skeptical. “Any problems with delusions?”

“Oh, I’m seeing clearly, Dr. Lecter.”

Hannibal gives him a long, searching look. Then he takes off his jacket, folds it over his arm, retrieves a chair from the far wall, brings it right up to the bars, and arranges himself carefully upon it.

Will stays standing. Hannibal wants him to feel comfortable. He wants this moment to remind Will of the many moments they have shared, sitting and talking together. Am I your psychiatrist or are we simply having conversations? The answer to that question is: No.

Hannibal is looking up at him with a face carved from driftwood. Will used to enjoy the impenetrability of this face. Its cool detachment, its alien-ness. He hadn’t been able to read Hannibal’s face, or the man who wore it. Will had found this unreadability a comfort. No alarm bells rang.

But now, behind the mask, Will can see the flicker of a merciless intelligence, the silhouette of some night creature prowling through the forest.

Hannibal is watching him just as closely as Will is watching Hannibal. “Alana Bloom tells me that you are still under the impression that I am responsible for what has happened to you.”

Will snorts. “Aren’t you?”

“Yes.” Hannibal pauses. He takes out the smile, lightning-quick, as if to check that Will is paying attention, that Will can really see—then again he shelves it away. “I have failed you as your doctor and as your friend. I understand why you blame me for the murders you committed, because I did commit them, in a way.”

“In a way,” Will echoes.

“I wish I had noticed what was happening to you. What you were becoming.”

“There’s a lot I wish I’d noticed, too.”

“Had you received treatment for your encephalitis sooner, all of this could have been avoided. I am truly sorry, Will.” Hannibal hangs his head.

Will can now appreciate the subtleties of Hannibal’s performance. He admits it is extremely well done. “You’re not sorry at all,” he says. “You couldn’t be happier, seeing me here, trapped in my little cage. Finally, your captive audience. So what are you waiting for? I’m here. Put on a show.”

“Oh, Will.” Hannibal shakes his head, face twisted with grief.

“I know you can do better than *that*.”

The pained expression disappears. Hannibal looks up. "It is clear to me that you haven't made a full recovery. This conviction you have concerning me is simply another delusion. It is not uncommon for patients to transfer on to their psychiatrists all the emotions they are afraid to direct upon themselves. In this instance, the guilt and shame elicited by your crimes, as well as your fear of the person you became while you committed them—you cannot face these feelings, so you transfer them to a safer place. Better to be betrayed by me, than betrayed by your own mind."

Will is laughing. "Oh, that's good," he says. "You've put an unimaginable amount of thought into this, haven't you? And it's really paid off. Transference, *of course*. Explains everything. Everyone's gonna believe it."

"But you don't believe?"

Will shakes his head.

"Why not?" Hannibal inquires, politely.

"I've seen behind the curtain."

"You are speaking of Minnesota?"

"Yes."

"You had a fever in Minnesota. You were drifting in and out of hallucinations."

"I was never as sick as you want everyone to believe I was."

"In Minnesota your actions were not those of a healthy man. Your actions now are not those of a healthy man."

"And you would know," Will says. "You try so hard to appear as you do. *Healthy*. 'Sanest man I know.' That's what Dr. Sutcliffe said about you. Before you killed him."

"Before you killed him," says Hannibal.

They stare at each other. Will has yet to break eye contact. "How did you get her ear down my throat?"

Hannibal doesn't even blink. "A repulsive suggestion."

"The fishing lures you could have planted. The dogs trusted you. They liked you. They would have let you in."

The barest smile. "You let me in, Will."

Will nods, accepting the correction. Hannibal is right. Will let him into his home and into his mind, and now he'll never get him out.

"You'll pay for all of it," he says quietly. "Someday."

Hannibal cocks his head, as if Will has spoken in a language foreign to him. “We can break our arrangement, if you wish,” he says. “Discontinue these conversations.”

“You’ll stop coming here?” Will doubts this very much.

“I will not force you to see me. In this institution you have plenty of psychiatric support. Dr. Bloom… and Dr. Chilton. ”

“Do you want to stop seeing me?” Will asks him, knowing the answer.

“This isn’t about what I want, Will.”

“Oh, I think it is.”

“If you believe I am responsible for your current condition, and that my skills as a psychiatrist are so limited that I cannot be allowed to speak in court on your behalf, then it seems inappropriate for you to continue receiving treatment from me.”

“I have nothing but the highest regard for your psychiatric skills, Doctor,” growls Will. And then, “I want to keep seeing you.”

“And why is that?” Hannibal looks genuinely curious, almost hungry.

“For the same reason you want to keep seeing me,” says Will.

He needs to see Hannibal because he needs to see the truth about himself reflected in Hannibal’s eyes. Hannibal is the only person who knows Will doesn’t belong in this prison. Will needs that certainty; he needs that strength. Hannibal can’t help but give it to him.

Hannibal is blinking at him, long lizardlike blinks. He says: “I wish to keep seeing you because I am eager to atone for my mistakes. These… *outlandish* notions of yours, together I believe we can examine them and break you of them. After that, you will be able to see the truth about me, and the truth about yourself.”

Will knows what ‘truth about himself’ Hannibal is getting at. “I’m not a murderer,” he tells him.

Hannibal’s eyes are hard and glittering. “Yes, Will, you are."

Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

> Will spends his first month of institutionalization antagonizing everyone around him. As strategies go, it's not the greatest.

The orderlies march him into what Dr. Chilton calls the Coffee Room. No beverages in here; the room is named for the oppressive color of paint on its walls. The Coffee Room is Dr. Chilton's interrogation chamber. There are no windows. The furniture consists of one long table and two heavy chairs. Will's has cloth straps that the orderlies fit with practiced hands across his wrists and ankles.

"Let's get this out of the way," Will says. "I'm not the Chesapeake Ripper."

Chilton, predictably, misses the joke. "I never said you were."

"Well, as long as I'm on trial for crimes I didn't commit, you might as well blame me for an extra dozen."

Chilton lowers himself with difficulty into the chair opposite Will. After his injury the hospital director doesn't often see his patients privately—but for Will he braves the pain.

"How can you be sure you didn't commit these murders?" he says, as he checks something in Will's file. "You were experiencing blackouts, periods of lost time."

"I know who I am," says Will, bored of Chilton already.

"I thought that was precisely your problem. You see into the minds of other people. You adopt their thinking, their neuroses. Sometimes without meaning to, am I right? Even without bringing the encephalitis into this, how can you ever be certain who you really are?"

Will shuts his eyes, wishing he could pinch at the bridge of his nose, where a slow pressure is building. But his hands are strapped down. "I didn't kill those people, Dr. Chilton."

"Then may I ask who did?"

Obviously Dr. Chilton is setting him up, but Will doesn't care. He answers:

“Hannibal Lecter.”

“Dr. Lecter is a respected psychiatrist,” Chilton says, as if this precludes him from murder.

Will nods. “More respected than you are.”

Oh, Chilton doesn’t like this. He drops his voice in an attempt to sound dangerous. “What do you see in my mind?” he asks Will. “What do you perceive about me?”

Will looks down at his knees, at his bound ankles, at the linoleum floor. “I am not a trick pony,” he mutters.

“You saw into your previous psychiatrist and decided he was a murderer.”

“I didn’t *decide*—” Will shakes his head. He knows it’s pointless. “You want to know what I see in your head, Doctor? I’ll tell you. Out there—” he gestures, vaguely, towards freedom —“you’re nobody. This is the only place where you get to matter. In here, you can be a hollow king of your own insipid little kingdom. And that’s fine with me, Dr. Chilton. Reign on. But whatever you do, *stay out of my head*.”

For a second, Chilton lets himself get scared. Then a look of petty satisfaction spreads across his face. He has provoked Will. He has scored a point. He folds his hands on top of Will’s file as he says: “I’m curious what you have against psychotherapy, Mr. Graham.”

Will begins to laugh. “Where to start?”

“I think you’re afraid that one day we may be able to understand you,” purrs Chilton, “with the same unforgiving verisimilitude with which *you think* you understand others. You fear the day when I, after a long period of study, have a better grasp on the inner workings of your mind than you do. That’s what I think.”

Will looks him straight in the eye. “Dream. On.”

After this session, Dr. Chilton ups his dosage of Risperdal.

He is Hannibal Lecter and he is a murderer. He is too accomplished a murderer to have begun his killing career with Cassie Boyle, and he has no plans to retire after Abigail Hobbs. He kills like a man who has killed many times before. He has absorbed and perfected the conveyance of death. His design is beautiful, but alien—the pendulum stutters—

Will tries and tries, but he can’t get close enough to Hannibal, not from within this damned cell. Reconstructing his killing methods won’t bring Will the answers he needs, so he becomes Hannibal Lecter in all areas of his life. He sits at Hannibal Lecter’s desk. He converses with Hannibal Lecter’s patients. He prepares Hannibal Lecter’s lavish dinner

parties. There is something that he's missing. There are gaps. Hannibal Lecter is telling the world a joke, and even Will Graham has yet to guess the punch line.

It is an existence so far removed from Will's bars and bricks and bed and pills that it is almost a comfort. He likes being Hannibal Lecter, likes living in Hannibal Lecter's kingdom. He likes how comfortable Hannibal Lecter feels under his skin. Hannibal Lecter knows who he is. He has an unshakeable confidence. It is his weakness. That, and he's insane.

"Will? Will?"

Will comes out of it to find Alana Bloom right up by the bars, staring at him with wide eyes. "Are you all right?" she asks him. "You looked…"

"What?" He slurs the word; he feels only half-awake. "What did I look like?"

"Like someone else," she says.

Will rubs his face. "Dr. Chilton has me on what I think are elephant tranquilizers."

"I've been trying to get him to scale back your medication, but he's resistant. He says you're a difficult patient."

"I am. Can you blame me?"

She shakes her head. "Will, if you're this brittle all the time, eventually you'll break. You need something to do. I can bring you books, or…"

"I want the copycat's case file," Will says immediately. "Crime scene photos, autopsy reports, witness statements, I want everything."

"Jack isn't going to let you see your own file."

"It's not my file. It's the copycat's. It was my case to solve, once."

"It's Jack's case now," Alana says, a hint of bitterness in her voice. She looks down at her dark red nails, and Will can tell she is debating whether or not to tell him something. She opts for the truth. "You should know, Jack sent Beverly Katz to interview Hannibal Lecter, and Price and Zeller are investigating his alibis."

Will leans so far forward he is in danger of falling off the bed. "What did they find?"

Alana can't make it any clearer how much she hates this conversation. "Nothing. They've found nothing. Hannibal is airtight."

"He is meticulous, Alana. He does everything—*everything*—with painstaking care. He thinks of himself as a grand Chessmaster, always ten steps ahead."

"That's not Hannibal," she says, very quietly, as she shakes her head.

“He has had months to get rid of evidence, to work out every detail. He knows every question they’re going to ask him. Oh,” Will shudders, overcome with the awe of it, “does he do his homework.”

“Or he could just be innocent,” she suggests.

He ignores this. “Jack will never catch him if he plays by the book.”

And suddenly Alana is on her feet, pointing at him. “The only reason Jack is investigating Hannibal is because *you* asked him to. You haven’t burned all your bridges at the Bureau. I hope you can see that. Jack wants to do right by you. And in return, you should at least try—*try*—to do right by him. You need to get better, Will. *And this obsession with Hannibal is preventing you from recovering*.”

By the end of this speech her voice is ringing off the walls. The other prisoners hoot and howl, laugh and catcall. The orderly rushes down the hall to calm them. Alana looks abashed, and pushes her hair off her forehead with one trembling hand.

“That was loud,” Will whispers to her, smiling.

“I’m sorry,” she says, “but I mean every word.”

“I’m sorry, too.” He wishes she could see inside his mind and understand. “But he did this to me, Alana. I know it in my gut and I’m never going to drop it. Never. I don’t care if it makes Chilton and the rest think I’m crazy. I don’t care if it affects my case in court. None of that will matter once I catch him. And I can catch him. I know I can. If you bring me that file.”

But she doesn’t bring him the file. Will has now been in the Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane for a solid month. His neurologist declares his brain officially un-inflamed. He’s still on a lot of medication, some prescribed by the medical doctors, some by Chilton. He sleeps badly and doesn’t eat much. Sometimes the walls of his cell shift before his eyes, like curtains rolling back. The creature that was once the black-feathered stag squats on the other side of the bars, making faces at him. In spite of all this, he feels unquestionably, unbreakably sane. He lies on his bed with his arms folded beneath his head and listens to the sounds of one of his fellow inmates crying. His sobs are great, wracking, never-ending, the sobs of an infant abandoned by its parents and rejected by the world. The inmate’s grief curls up in Will’s throat, the inmate’s tears slide down Will’s cheeks. He can’t help it.

Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

Will and Hannibal engage in some role-playing. Alas, not the sexy kind.

“You seem tired, Will.”

As has become their usual arrangement, Hannibal sits and Will stands facing him. Positioned like this, they resemble a teacher and a pupil, an actor and an audience, with a wall of bars between them.

“I’m fine,” says Will. The truth is he feels like shit.

“I imagine it must be exhausting,” Hannibal says, “trapped in that little cell with no release from the pressures of your mind.”

“One day soon you won’t need to imagine it.”

Hannibal doesn’t react. “Your colleague Beverly Katz paid me a visit. I presume I have you to thank for that.”

“Jack sent her,” Will says. “She rattle your cage?”

“We had an interesting conversation, but I suspect our interview was a formality. Miss Katz saw what she expected to see. She believes you are the copycat, and a few words with me did nothing to alter her opinion.”

Will breaks eye contact. Hannibal pushes further.

“By now you must realize that the more you insist you aren’t a murderer, the less the FBI will support you. Jack Crawford does as you tell him only because he is humoring you. Meanwhile he has asked Dr. Chilton to run some tests for suspected brain damage. Jack is worried your encephalitis progressed too far, that your mind may never fully recover.”

Will can’t look anywhere near Hannibal, but he makes himself laugh, harshly. “I think you’re a murderer, so now I must have brain damage?”

“An inevitable conclusion,” Hannibal says, “when Jack is afraid to consider the alternative.” At Will’s inquiring look, he elaborates: “That you are a psychopath who only happened to suffer from encephalitis. That you knowingly murdered Cassie Boyle and all the rest, and your current state of confusion is a ploy by which you hope to escape the death penalty.”

“Jack will never believe that,” Will says, gravel-voiced.

“A part of him already does.” Hannibal’s eyes emit a dark gleam. “Jack will never trust you again, Will. Neither will Miss Katz. Even Alana’s faith is…slipping. It must be terrible to watch as, one by one, all the people in your life desert you.”

Will says nothing, lets on nothing. It’s not exactly subtle what Hannibal is doing. Will won’t give him the chance to lap up his pain.

“I imagine you feel very lonely,” Hannibal prompts him.

Will juts his chin. “How can I be lonely, Doctor? You’re all the company I need. And you’ll always have unlimited access, won’t you.”

Hannibal nods. “Dr. Chilton and I have an understanding.”

So Hannibal is cozying up with Dr. Chilton, too. Will’s life keeps getting better and better. He smiles painfully and says:

“You can’t stay away. Always returning to the scene of the crime. Not the smartest behavior for a murderer.”

Something shifts in Hannibal’s expression, a shade of annoyance, maybe. “I have already told you why I wish to continue seeing you.”

“Yes, you have, but that was a lie.”

“I never lie to you, Will.”

Will nods, acknowledging this. “Then you told me the wrong version of the truth.”

“And which version is correct?”

Will takes a step towards the bars. “You keep coming back and coming back *because I know who you are.* All your life you’ve acted a part, with precision and commitment, but inside you burned with desperation, wishing someone could see you for real. The trouble was, you didn’t want to get caught. You always assumed that if someone found out the truth about you, that it would be your end—or, more likely, theirs. But with me you’ve found a way to be seen and live free. Have your cake and eat it. You must feel *invincible*.”

Hannibal is leaning forward in his chair, breathing in Will’s words. “You have given me a great deal of thought,” he says. “This version of me who exists inside your head. You have examined him very closely.”

“He’s *you*.”

Hannibal smiles into the silence. “I’d like to try an exercise,” he says. “A bit of role-playing.”

Will raises his eyebrows. “Role-playing?”

“We will have a conversation. I’d like you to speak as this man whom you believe me to be. The man who expended so much time and effort in framing you for five murders.”

In spite of himself, Will is intrigued. “And who are you gonna be?”

“I’ll be you,” says Hannibal. “Shall we begin?”

Slowly Will nods, because why not?

Hannibal folds forward in his chair and his hands begin twitching in his lap. “I want to know why you’re doing this to me.”

It is hardly an accurate impersonation, but there is a tremor in Hannibal’s voice Will recognizes. It makes him feel ill at ease, as though he is being mocked.

“Because I’m a serial killer,” he grumbles, not playing Hannibal so much as a bitter incarnation of himself.

“Will,” says Hannibal, breaking character, “I’d like you to cooperate. Now”—he switches back to being Will—“why are you doing this to me?”

Will glares at Hannibal out of the corners of his eyes. “Because I can,” he says.

This answer is insufficient for Hannibal, but he lets it pass. “What are you hoping to gain by framing me?”

“Besides getting carte blanche to continue with my murders?” Will asks.

But at Hannibal’s chiding look, he steels himself and plays along.

“I—I want…I want to be entertained,” he says, but he can see that Hannibal doesn’t like that answer. “I want to be appreciated,” Will ventures, but he knows that isn’t exactly right. “I want…companionship, of a sort.”

Hannibal says nothing. A challenge pulses in his lidded eyes. All of a sudden Will decides to dedicate himself fully to the game. Without a word he sits down on the chair by his desk. He breaks eye contact with Hannibal and lets the pendulum swing. He can feel the intensity of Hannibal’s stare like a razor dragging across his skin. He doesn’t usually do this with someone watching him—Jack always kept onlookers away. But Hannibal’s presence is no impediment. In fact, the pendulum swings faster and faster, almost too fast.

Lengthening his back and squaring his shoulders, he unconsciously mirrors Hannibal’s posture. After a moment, he speaks:

“I want to better understand who I am, through you.”

Hannibal is electrified. He has never seen Will do this before, and has always wanted to. With effort he slips back into character.

“How do you imagine all of this ending?” he asks, as Will.

“I don’t imagine it ever ending,” Will says, as Hannibal.

“Do you want to kill me?” Hannibal asks, as Will.

“No.”

“But you would, if you had to.”

“If I had to. But I wouldn’t want to.”

“Why don’t you want to?”

“Because you and I are just alike.” Will hardly hears what he’s saying, he’s so deep in it. “And I have too high a regard for myself to break a mirror.”

Hannibal’s voice travels miles to reach him. “Why did you kill Cassie Boyle?”

Will’s answers, which up until now have been halting, slow blooming, now burst from him fully flowered. “To help you solve the Hobbs case.”

“Why Marissa Schuur?”

“Because she was close to Abigail. And because you said the copycat wouldn’t kill that way again. I wanted to confuse you, to show you that you didn’t have me figured out.”

“Why Doctor Sutcliffe?”

“He was officious,” Will says, as Hannibal. “He lied for me, but I knew he wouldn’t continue lying. He wanted something in return.”

“Why Georgia Madchen?”

Will looks Hannibal dead in the eye. “To hurt you.”

Hannibal’s face is grave. “Why Abigail Hobbs?”

“Because…” And without warning Will’s font of words dries up. In its place, a torrent of emotion. His? Hannibal’s? He doesn’t know. “Because I had to,” he says. “I didn’t want to. You forced my hand.” The words surprise him so much he is wrenched back into his own frame of mind. “You—you blame me for her death. Her ear...that was your way of *punishing* me.”

Hannibal’s face is as hard and unforgiving as stone. But then, very slowly, it softens. “Thank you,” he says. “That was enlightening. A useful tool, role-playing. Many psychiatrists

dismiss it as passé, but for your therapy I feel it makes a certain sense, considering the way in which you think."

"It makes a certain sense," Will echoes, absently. He isn't finished with role-playing. "We should switch parts," he says. "I'll be me. You be you."

Hannibal smiles. "Isn't that what we are doing now?"

"I want you to be you," Will says. "The real you." And at Hannibal's (faked) confusion: "Fine. The version of you who exists inside my head. Be him."

"If it helps you," Hannibal says, indifferently.

Will is surprised. He didn't expect Hannibal to agree, at least not so quickly.

Hannibal's face is now a mask of polite expectation. It doesn't look any more like Hannibal's true face than the many previous faces Will has seen. He wonders if this is some kind of trap. But even if it is a trap, does he care?

"How many people have you killed?"

Hannibal thinks for a long time. Are there too many for him to count?

But then he says: "Five."

"No," says Will.

Hannibal raises his eyebrows, a casual challenge. "Five," he repeats.

Will's voice shakes with anger. He played by Hannibal's rules; the least Hannibal can do is play by his. "I *know* Cassie Boyle wasn't your first victim. You don't go from perfect law-abiding citizen to mounting a girl on a stag's head in a field."

"People do strange things," Hannibal says, simply.

"How many have you killed?" Will is almost shouting now. He can hear the orderlies snapping to attention at the end of the hall.

A look of amusement carves itself on to Hannibal's face. "More than five," he admits.

Will knows it's the most he's going to get. "Will you kill again?"

"I expect so."

"You're a serial killer."

Hannibal sniffs in distaste. "I *am*." He isn't accepting Will's label—he is negating it.

"Do you always copy other people's murders? Or do you have a style of your own?"

"I have methods," Hannibal says carefully. "But I am adaptable."

“I bet you are,” On Will’s face there is a wild and improbable smile. “If you have methods, then you have a pattern.”

“Perhaps.”

“I can reconstruct it. I can reconstruct *you*.”

“I expect nothing less from you,” Hannibal says, with an almost-tenderness. “But I must warn you, Will. I am like no killer you have ever chased. I am beyond your range of experience, and even your imagination can only stretch so far. What’s more, you are in chains, while I am free to go anywhere, free to speak to anyone—alone, unaware, unprotected.”

Will says nothing. He doesn’t even breathe.

Hannibal stands up, re-buttons his suit jacket. “If I were the man you believe me to be, then it would be unwise of you to send further FBI agents to my door.”

He brushes himself down, as if sweeping lint from his impeccable suit, and when he looks up, the mask is back. “But luckily for you, I am not him.” And he isn’t. He is the good doctor returned. He dips his head at Will solicitously. “Did you find that helpful?”

“Immeasurably,” Will whispers. He wants to stand up, to match Hannibal, but his legs are trembling.

“I hope I did him justice, this killer from your imagination.”

Will tries to laugh. It comes out a sigh. “You play your part very well, Doctor. As you know.”

That night Will plays his part. He is Hannibal Lecter and he is a serial killer. The blank face he presents to the world is a mask. Behind it, he is arrogant and full of passion. He is not a sociopath. His emotions bear almost no resemblance to those of other humans, but they are present and they run deep, so deep that sometimes they confuse him. They run through his fingers like melting snow. He can’t hold them long enough to examine them. So instead he examines the emotions of others. He analyzes. He dissects. He dismisses those who don’t interest him. He luxuriates in those who do. He drinks from the swelling cups they offer him.

The pendulum eases its swing.

Will can hear someone crying. It is the inmate José Faria three cells down, crying for the second night in a row. This time Will doesn’t feel the inmate’s pain, because he is still Hannibal Lecter. Instead he lies in bed, curled around himself, and listens, rapt, as if Faria’s weeping were a cantata meant for Will alone. He allows the sobs to penetrate him. He relishes their tang.

Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

Will puts himself to use.

He wakes up feeling out of joint, as if the confines of his mind have stretched so far they can't snap back. He has lost his shape, and he can't remember why. What did he do last night? There shouldn't be black holes in his memory, that's supposed to be behind him.

He sits up in bed. His arms shake. There is sweat in his hair. A feeling starts to rise. Nausea, he thinks wildly. *Her other ear.* But after a long few minutes of parsing himself, he realizes that the feeling isn't nausea—it is shame. Then he remembers: the cantata, Faria's tears. Will spent the night enjoying someone else's pain. Jesus.

He maps his face with his hands, stares at the grooves in his palms. He doesn't have a mirror.

He overreached. He delved too deeply into Hannibal's mind and got confused. Knowing Hannibal does not entail becoming Hannibal. Will has to be stronger than that. He can't afford to lose himself in this place, not even for a moment. That is what Hannibal wants.

He looks beyond the bars at Faria, who is still asleep. Will watches the rise and fall of the man's shoulders, his narrow back. Faria killed three vagrants, thinking they were devils. He smothered his girlfriend with the body of their two-year-old daughter. Faria is schizophrenic. He was undiagnosed at the time of his crimes.

Will's shame builds to a pitch. This man is sick, and Will took pleasure in leeching off his anguish. What does that make him?

The hours pass like river sludge. Finally the orderlies arrive with Will's breakfast and meds. Without being told, Will steps to the wall, spreads his arms, and presents the guards with his back. He is all cooperation today.

The head orderly puts down the tray, and turns to leave.

"You should get Faria a clock," Will says.

Though he can't see the other men in his cell, he is aware of a look passing between them. They are deciding whether or not to engage with him.

Finally the head orderly asks, "Why a clock?"

"You've heard him. He cries all night because he's confused. Faria has no windows, nothing to hold on to. Nothing to remind him who he is. When the lights go out, it's as if he's being buried alive. Give him a clock and you give him a shovel he can use to dig himself out."

"A clock," the orderly repeats, now taking the suggestion seriously.

He walks to where Will can see him. The orderly is a big man, but he carries his strength with a certain mildness. His dark eyes rove over Will, trying to get him to make eye contact.

"You want a clock, too?"

Will shakes his head, attempts a smile. "I don't need one."

"Why's that?" Barney asks him.

Will thinks of Hannibal Lecter. "Because I've already got my shovel."

Three days later, Barney hangs a clock with a digital face and soft edges on the wall across from the inmate Faria's cell. The crying stops.

After that, Barney begins seeking Will out to talk about the other inmates. Will gives him insight into the minds behind the bars, and in return Barney gives Will the gift of being believed. Will tells him Donovan is at breaking point, that Elvenko is overmedicated, that it isn't good for anyone to have Heig and Mosley in adjacent cells. The other inmates hear Will discussing them and begin calling him "Dr. Graham," always with a sneer. Will doesn't mind; he is enjoying being useful, even in this small way.

Especially when he sees how it yanks Chilton's chain.

"Barney, I'd prefer if you didn't take advice from *unlicensed* sources," the doctor says in the Coffee Room. "Especially when said source is mentally unsound."

A chair without restraints for Will today, but Barney cuffs one of his hands to a metal brace in the middle of the table. "Just doing my job, sir," the orderly says, calmly. "If one of the patients brings me a problem, I do what I can to fix it."

Chilton wags a finger. “I’ll have less fixing from you, Barney. And from you, Mr. Graham. You have enough to worry about without concerning yourself with my patients’ wellbeing.”

“Seems to me your patients could stand to have a few more people concerned with their wellbeing,” Will says, quietly.

Chilton’s lips go thin. “Are you questioning the quality of care we provide here, Mr. Graham?”

“I’m not questioning the quality of your care, Doctor. I’m questioning its existence.”

Chilton snaps down the stack of papers he’s holding. “The patients I treat are *criminals*! As are you!”

Ringing silence.

“Mr. Graham is still awaiting trial, sir,” Barney reminds him, and Will has to stop himself from laughing.

“That will be all, Barney.” Chilton is seething.

Barney leaves the two of them alone. Chilton’s chest rises and falls so rapidly that he presses a hand to it, stemming a wave of discomfort from his still-healing injury.

“We’re doing a neuropsychological battery today,” he hisses at Will. “Do you know what I’m testing for?”

“Brain damage,” Will mutters.

“That’s right. It might interest you to know that—”

“Jack Crawford asked you to administer these tests,” Will says, stopping Chilton’s gloating in its tracks.

Dr. Chilton’s eyes narrow. “Did Dr. Lecter tell you that?”

Will doesn’t answer.

“Interesting,” Chilton says, “that you’re still listening to him. Hardly seems consistent with your previous, ah, *accusations*.”

Will doesn’t answer.

“Unless you have recanted your accusations?”

“I haven’t recanted,” Will says. His voice is deadly.

“Things might go better for you if you did,” Dr. Chilton says. “But then again, I don’t expect a man like you to see reason. After all, the logic centers of your brain may have been compromised by your illness. Let’s check them out, shall we?”

Will draws shapes, groups objects, connects dots, taps his fingers to a beat. Chilton tests his memory for what feels like hours. Will doesn't say a word other than what the tests require of him. His cooperation is grudging, but it is cooperation nonetheless, which is more than Chilton deserves. But Will isn't doing it for Chilton. He's doing it for Jack. Jack needs to know that Will isn't broken.

The pendulum swings. The walls of his cell fall away one by one like the panels on a cardboard box. Beyond them: the sumptuous décor of Hannibal Lecter's office. He is Hannibal Lecter, sitting at his desk, faithfully reproducing a Raphael sketch with precise pencil strokes. Beside his work rests a copy of Will's test results. Will has passed the neuropsychological battery with flying colors, and Chilton has attached a note pointing out that his spatial memory and imaging abilities scored off the charts. Will's mind is undamaged —physically, that is. One less excuse at which poor Jack can grasp.

What does Hannibal do now? How best to cut away at the moorings tethering Will to his old life? How best to overwrite his sensibilities, his morals, all those bothersome hang-ups with which Hannibal is gradually losing his patience? The board is set. Hannibal has his hands on all the pieces. He would like to start moving them, so he takes out his phone and calls…and calls…

The pendulum stops. Will can hear the inmates at the other end of the hall whistling and laughing. A female visitor, then. Alana. Will stands up, rubs his face, straightens the collar on his jumpsuit. He will make an effort this time. He wants to do better for Alana. He can't trust everything Hannibal tells him, but if there's any truth in what he said about Alana's faith slipping…

The visitor is not Alana.

"Hey, stranger," says Beverly. The Baltimore State Hospital welcoming committee hasn't rattled her, but there is something wary in the way she thrusts her hands deep into the pockets of her bomber jacket.

"Hey," Will says, uncertainly.

Her eyes fly back and forth, taking in the details of his bare cell.

"Nice place you got here. Could use some decorating. Have you thought about getting a poster? Maybe something motivational, like the one with the kitten on the tree branch that says 'Hang in there, baby'."

"I'm more of a dog person," Will says. He senses something new in Beverly's patter. Something nervous, even anxious. She stays standing, keeps her hands buried in her pockets.

As if it's being forced out of her, she says, "I guess you do look better."

“Um, thanks?”

“Sorry, but you looked like death last time I saw you, so there was plenty of room for improvement. And honestly, there still kind of is. They treating you all right in here?”

He shrugs. “Like I’m a science experiment gone wrong.”

“So, same as always, huh?”

They exchange strained smiles. Beverly’s posture relaxes. She sees that despite the new context—the looming guards, the other inmates, the cell, the jumpsuit—Will is much the same as always.

“We miss you down at the Bureau,” she says.

Will appreciates this obvious lie. “I’m sure things are a lot less strange there with me gone.”

“They’re still pretty damn strange,” she says. “Even more strange, in some ways.” At his questioning look, she bursts out with: “Jack is under review. Petersen’s riding him hard, questioning his job performance, his judgment, basically every decision he’s made in the past two years.”

Will hears the anger in Beverly’s voice. He knows that behind her veneer of irreverence, she worships Jack.

He says, “Including Jack’s decision to put me back in the field.”

She nods. “That’s exhibit number one. Obviously.”

“Petersen has a point. Jack made a lot of mistakes when it came to me.”

Beverly just looks at him, stony-faced. Without preamble she asks:

“Did you do it?”

Will returns eye contact steadily. “No.”

“‘No,’ as in you don’t remember doing it, or ‘no,’ as in you didn’t do it, period?”

“I didn’t do it. Period.”

“The forensic evidence is against you.”

“So you’ve told me,” Will says.

“Yeah, but that was before I saw the fishing lures.” As she says this, Beverly’s face twists in a way that cuts Will somewhere deep.

“I haven’t seen them, Beverly,” he says. “I’ve *never* seen them.”

“You think they were planted in your house?”

He nods.

“By your *psychiatrist*?”

Will shrugs ruefully, nods again.

Beverly shakes her head. “Christ,” she says. “I just don’t know, Will. I just don’t know.”

“I know it sounds crazy.”

“Yeah, but you’ve *always* sounded crazy,” she says. “This is on a whole new level. This is Don Quixote-level crazy, Will.”

He can’t look at her. “You interviewed Dr. Lecter, didn’t you?”

And immediately she is on her guard. “He’s clean,” she says. “Had an alibi for each of the murders. Even for the Schuur girl: the owner of the motel in Bloomington remembers seeing Dr. Lecter that night, and she doesn’t remember seeing you. Though Dr. Lecter is a hell of a lot more memorable than you are—sorry—it’s all those three-piece suits he wears. And you should see the guy’s records; it’s like a museum. He has appointment books and journals going back *years*, and he keeps all his receipts. It’s like he’s doing research for his own biography.”

Will thinks this is a distinct possibility. He also senses something in Beverly’s voice.

“You don’t like him,” he says. “Dr. Lecter.”

She sighs, wanting to be honest, but knowing she shouldn’t give him any hope. “Well, ok, I’ve always thought there was something a little off about him. He’s just too put-together, you know? Too composed. It’s creepy. Maybe it’s just that he’s really, um, *European*. But just because he’s a little strange, Will, that doesn’t make him a murderer.”

“I know.”

“*Why* are you so sure it’s him?”

This stops Will short, and it takes him a moment to understand why. “You know,” he says, “you’re the first person to actually ask me that question.”

“Does that question have an answer?”

He sighs. “It’s hard to explain.”

Her face is intense. “Try.”

“I saw something in Minnesota,” he says, carefully.

“What did you see?”

He thinks and thinks, but there’s just no good way to describe it.

“A monster,” he admits.

And just like that, he has lost her. Beverly is a forensic scientist; she needs hard evidence, not a phantom. She looks back down the hallway, at the exit, her escape.

“Maybe I shouldn’t have come,” she says.

“Why did you come?” Will asks. “Did Jack send you? Or did you send you?”

She turns to look at him. He can tell she is making a decision. Then she reaches into her messenger bag and pulls out a file.

“Jack sent me,” she says.

He is up at the bars so quickly that Beverly takes a step back. He pretends not to notice this for both their sakes.

“My file?” he asks, staring at it. Has Alana come through for him after all?

“Not unless your name is Phillipa Goldthwaite,” Beverly says. And at his look of utter confusion, “Or Barbara Lewis. Or Amanda Frances Green. Three different women, all pushed on to the tracks of the New York subway last week.”

Will oh-so-slowly raises his eyebrows.

“Here’s the thing.” Beverly's voice assumes its usual rhythm when describing a case. “None of them had MetroCards on them. They didn’t pay the fare. And they were all wearing white dresses at the time of their death, same size, same manufacturer.”

“You think this is a serial killer,” Will says, staring at her.

“Jack thinks this is a serial killer. And Jack wants to know whether *you* think this is a serial killer.”

He is so stunned he can’t immediately speak. “A case,” he grinds out.

Beverly draws herself up. “How do you feel about working for the FBI again?”

“Um.” He honestly doesn’t know what to say. “*Confused*, I guess. Has Jack forgotten I’m in a maximum-security mental hospital?”

Beverly can’t hide her smirk. “Trust me, he hasn’t forgotten.”

“He thought I had *brain damage* last week. And now he wants to hire me?”

“Well, he’s not going to pay you,” she says. “But if you help us, he says he’ll see it as ‘a show of good faith.’”

Will doesn’t especially feel like showing ‘good faith’ to Jack. “He must be really desperate,” he says.

Beverly gives the file a shake. “He needs a win right now. And he thinks you might need one, too.”

“Yeah, but a win for Jack isn’t necessarily a win for me.”

Will stares through the bars at the file: just a folder for now, beige, unmarked, nondescript, the black edge of a photograph just peeking out the top. A Pandora’s box, full of horrors as yet unimagined.

“I’m sorry," he says. "It's not a good idea.”

Beverly’s eyebrows draw together. “You think you can’t handle it?”

“I know I *can* handle it. That’s the problem.”

She slowly lowers the file. “It’s your choice,” she says. “But Will, you know that working these cases didn’t put you in this cell, right? Before you got sick, you saved lives. You helped people. You helped us. Whatever else you might have done…it was caused by an illness. By *encephalitis*. Not by the work you do. The work you do made you a better person, not a worse one.”

Will says nothing. If he hadn’t gone back into the field, he would never have met Hannibal Lecter. The work he did was what aroused Hannibal Lecter’s interest, and now catching Hannibal Lecter is the only work Will cares about doing. He feels there isn’t enough space inside his mind to devote to another killer. He can’t tell Beverly any of this, of course. Jack has sent her to Will hoping she can secure Will’s cooperation where Jack cannot. Beverly is sensible; she says what she thinks. Will likes her. Will doesn’t want to disappoint her. Jack knows all this. Jack is playing him. Again.

He can play Jack back.

“I want my file,” he says. “The copycat’s file.”

Beverly looks worried. “I don’t know. Even Jack might not have the pull to get you that.”

“He’ll get it for me,” Will says. “Or more girls are gonna die in New York.”

Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

Will goes back to work for the FBI. It's just like old times, only it isn't.

Jack strides down the corridor. His shoulders are tense, his eyes thick-lidded. The other inmates sense he isn't a man to be messed with, and they keep their peace.

Jack stops at Will's cell. Looks him up and down. Will finds himself standing a little at attention, like a soldier in front of a commanding officer, ready for inspection. Even after more than a month apart, Jack still has power over him.

There is a folder tucked beneath Jack's arm.

Jack's mouth settles into a frown. "Before we do this, I have to get a few things out of the way." He takes a very deep breath. "I worked with you, Will. I knew you."

Will notes his use of the past tense. Says nothing.

"The Will I knew put his health at risk to help people in danger. He'd work himself to the brink of exhaustion to solve a case. The Will I knew, he wouldn't use a woman's life as a bargaining chip."

Will flinches, stung. "No," he says. "That's more something you would do."

And the temperature between them drops to Arctic levels.

Jack stares at him, nostrils flared. Then he reaches into the folder and pulls out a crime scene photograph. A woman with dark skin, long hair, most of her face crushed in. He thrusts this photograph against the bars of Will's cell.

"The Will I knew would want to put a stop to this. He'd want to help us any way he could. He wouldn't see this woman's death as a means to an end, as a way of bailing himself out of his own bad situation."

Will is fraying. Will wants to snap. “This isn’t about getting me out of here. It’s about the killer who put me in this cell and *is still out there*. As long as you’ve got a blind eye on him, the bodies are gonna keep piling up. I’ll catch your killer for you, Jack. But you have to let me catch mine.”

Jack doesn’t exactly look convinced by this, but there is the barest hint of recognition in his eyes. Through the bars he sees the Will he knew. He puts the woman’s photograph back inside the folder. Then he asks, “Still think the killer you’re looking for is Hannibal Lecter?”

Will’s hackles rise. “So what if I do?”

Jack shakes his head. “Ok,” he says. “Here’s how it’s gonna be. I’ll give you the copycat’s file, but with a few conditions. One: you don’t get the file until you find the Subway Pusher. I can’t have you splitting time between your case and mine—all your attention belongs on me. The day we close my case is the day you open yours. Understood?”

“Understood.”

“Two: I need to know I can trust your judgment here. If I can’t trust your judgment, Will, I can’t trust your casework, and if I can’t trust your casework then I’ve got no use for you. So if you do anything—say *anything*—that makes me question your judgment, I will pull you off this case. No case, no copycat file. That’s how it works.”

Will can’t stand it. He begins pacing the perimeter of his cell. Jack registers this, but still plows forward with his speech:

“If I hear you say a word about criminal mastermind Hannibal Lecter, either to me or to anyone else on my team, then it’s all over for you. You won’t see me, or my people again until your court date. Do we understand each other, Will?”

Will is alive with fury. He saw this coming, but that doesn’t make it burn any less. “How can you—you—you’re giving me the copycat file,” he stammers. “You know what I want to do with it.”

“I know. But I don’t want to hear about it.”

“Jack, you can’t *stop* me from believing what I believe!”

“No,” Jack admits, and his face slackens, a touch of remorse, “I can’t. I wish I could, but I can’t. What I can do is stop you from talking about it. You stop talking about it, maybe one day you’ll stop believing it. Or so I hope.”

Will says nothing. He senses Hannibal’s hand in this. Hannibal, through Jack, is fitting a gag on him.

“Now, do we understand each other?” Jack asks. “Or do I walk out the way I came?”

The silence stretches on and on.

A Devil’s bargain, thinks Will. He has some familiarity with those.

He extends an arm for the file, and Jack smiles, mollified, as he hands it through the bars to him.

Late night. The platform is almost empty. Sleepy-eyed stragglers head home from a night out, while a few service workers embark on their pre-dawn commute. All of them solitary, their gazes turned inward by the earliness of the hour and the silence of the subway. No one notices the woman in white. No one except Will.

He knows how to follow her without looking like he's following her. As she walks the length of the platform, she weaves a little—her balance is compromised, by alcohol or exhaustion or fear. She stops on the Queens-bound side and hovers near the platform's edge. A low rumble fills the station. A train on its way.

Will trails her, not too closely. The train's headlights sweep over her, they shine through her hair. Her neck twists. Over her shoulder she looks at Will—looks right at him, a silent question. He offers her the smallest smile, merely a twitch of his lips, and then she jumps into the path of the approaching train. Its triumphant roar engulfs Will until it seems to be coming from inside him, the walls of the subway station flicker as if unsure of their own shape, and all the while the train keeps coming, keeps coming, howling as it goes.

The vision clears in increments. The platform and the people fade, but the train remains, rattling through the corridor beyond the bars of his cell. Its slipstream ruffles his hair, wags the collar of his jumpsuit. He backs away.

Then the train, too, disappears. In its place stand Jack, Beverly, Jimmy Price, and Brian Zeller.

"Will?" Jack prompts.

Will's heartbeat sounds thickly in his ears. He isn't sure where he is. New York City? Quantico? The puzzle pieces won't fit together. Eventually he understands. Today the BAU has come to the Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane, his previous life bleeding into his present one. There beyond the bars, his old colleagues, sans white coats, are waiting for his verdict on the Subway Pusher. Dr. Chilton is there too, sitting enraptured alongside the FBI agents with a clipboard balanced on his knees.

"Fascinating," he says to himself as he scribbles notes. "Some form of auto-hypnosis?"

"Not now, Doctor!" Jack barks. "Will? You here with us?"

Will doesn't respond. He looks back down at the crime scene photos, tiled across the floor of his cell. There are so many of them. Will only has one bare patch of floor to stand in.

“He’s catatonic, I’ve observed this before,” Dr. Chilton says. “And you see how he’s mirroring you, Agent Crawford? Classic presentation of echopraxia.”

Jack slides over, grabs Chilton’s clipboard out of his hands, and flaps it at the exit. “I need you to leave,” he says.

Chilton blusters: “How—dare—you—this is my hospital!”

“This is my investigation you are currently obstructing.”

“I have the right to observe my own patient!”

“No you don’t! Out! Out! Out!” says Jack, all but chasing Dr. Chilton out, who mutters furiously as he scuttles down the hall. Will watches this spectacle, and finds himself resenting Jack just that little bit less.

“So, Will?” Jack says, turning back to him. “What do you have for me?”

Will looks back down at the photographs. In the discordant jumble of his old life and his new, the familiar and the unfamiliar, these images of death and violence serve to ground him.

“Your Subway Pusher isn’t a pusher,” he says.

Jack’s eyebrows rise. “So he isn’t a serial killer?”

“He’s a serial killer all right, but he doesn’t push them. He’s making them jump somehow.”

“How?”

Will rubs his eyes, shakes his head. Everything is flickering, like a bad connection. The platform, Phillipa Goldthwaite, all of it feels dust-covered, distant.

“How do you make someone jump in front of a train without pushing them?” Zeller asks. While Jack, Beverly, and Price are standing in various poses of thoughtfulness near the bars of Will’s cell, Zeller has removed himself, and is sloped against the corner near the radiator.

“He couldn’t have drugged them,” Beverly says. “Tox screen was clean.”

“I don’t know how he did it,” Will says. “He’s so far away from me, Jack. My head’s full of static. I’m not used to doing this without being on a crime scene…”

“You know I can’t take you to the crime scenes,” Jack says.

“I know,” Will grumbles, not wanting the reminder.

“It makes sense no one pushed them,” Beverly says. “Since no one’s seen a pusher.”

While there is a sheen of sweat on Price’s forehead and Zeller looks ready to bolt, Beverly acts like she is conferring with a valued colleague, just another day at the office. For that Will couldn’t be more grateful to her. She continues:

“The witnesses at the station in Queens only saw Phillipa Goldthwaite fall. There were no eyes on Amanda Frances Green or Barbara Lewis at all. And no pushers turned up on the closed circuit footage.”

“No usable prints on the bodies either,” Price puts in. “No physical evidence other than what the train left behind.”

“What are you saying?” Jack asks. “That this guy wasn’t even on the platform with the women when they fell?”

“He was there,” Will says. “He was watching.”

“Why do you say that?”

Will crouches down and gently touches the photographs, one by one. “The dress. Same white dress on all three victims. He chose that dress. He made each of them wear it, just like he made each of them jump. They looked beautiful. They went to their deaths with dignity. He had to be there, he had to see. If you went to all that trouble, wouldn’t you want to be there to watch your work unfold?”

Only after he says this does he realize it is no longer advisable for him to give voice to the thoughts that make him sound like a serial killer. The others are very determinedly not looking at him. Zeller has backed so far away from Will that he’ll have to tunnel through the wall to get any further.

Will does his best to ignore all of this. “You’re looking for someone who could stand on that platform without being noticed. Someone familiar with the stations, who knew when they’d be deserted, and knew the blind spots for all the cameras.”

“Like a subway employee?” Beverly asks.

“Yeah,” Will says. “Maybe.”

“We’ve already interviewed everyone on duty at all three stations where the women were killed,” Zeller says. “There was no overlap among the staff. They all checked out.”

“Then check them again,” says Will. “You could have missed something.”

Zeller bristles. “I don’t need you to tell me how to do my job.”

“Z,” Jack growls.

“Hey, I’m sorry, but look where we are. Look where he is! How can you still talk to him like he’s a *person*—”

“Will is a person,” snaps Jack.

“You’re looking for someone who knows how to hide in plain sight,” Will says quietly, with a plea in his voice, addressing himself only to Beverly because he can’t bear to look at anyone else.

“And you’d know all about hiding in plain sight,” Zeller says.

Jack rears around at him. “Out!” he roars. “Out now!”

Zeller balls his fists, but that doesn’t detract from the pronounced deer-in-the-headlights expression he’s suddenly sporting.

“DON’T MAKE ME TELL YOU AGAIN,” Jack roars.

In the neighboring cells the inmates snicker. The sound echoes off the brick walls, it burrows under Will’s skin until he’s buzzing.

Zeller throws one last bitter look at Will, and stalks up the corridor.

Will hitches up a horrible smile. “Dissension in the ranks, Jack?”

Jack ignores him. He turns to Price. “You too.”

Price’s eyes go wide. “But I haven’t said anything!”

But Jack only has to look at him. Price hangs his head and flees.

Will feels the horrible smile on his face spreading wider. “Maybe it wasn’t the best idea to send FBI agents to pick the brain of a suspected serial killer.”

“I’m sorry, Will,” Beverly says, and she looks it. But Jack hasn’t given up.

“Just give us something,” he says. “Something that’s gonna help me catch him.”

Will sees desperation and disappointment warring for dominance inside Jack. Will doesn’t care which wins; he’s just glad to see Jack torn up over something.

He has the sudden irrational desire to scream “Hannibal Lecter did this to us!” at the top of his lungs. But Will stifles it with difficulty, knowing how Jack will react, and instead looks down at the wall of photographs he has built around himself.

“He knew these women. He convinced them to jump; it would have taken time. He went way back with them. If you find something that connects the victims, you’ll find your pusher.”

Jack nods, appeased. “That’s good, Will,” he says.

“I hope it was worth the trip,” Will says, “and the trouble.”

Jack sighs, silently admitting to Will what he already knows: this consultation has been a clusterfuck. He indicates to Beverly that it’s time to go.

“Hey Jack!” Will calls after him. “I was sorry to hear about your review.”

He has brought it up to hurt Jack, but when Jack turns back to face him, all somberness and droop, Will instantly regrets it.

“You’ll be all right,” he says instead. “They need you down at the Bureau.” And as Will says it, he finds he means it.

He catches the barest flash of a smile from Beverly.

Meanwhile Jack draws himself up and nods, grateful for this vouch of support, even if it’s coming from someone behind bars.

“They need you, too, Will,” he says. “They need you, too.”

Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

More Devil's bargains for Will.

For weeks the metal desk has been nothing but a resting place for dinner trays, but now it transforms into his little office. He covers it with photos from the case file, stacks the paperwork in squat towers near the desk legs. His own notes he makes in crayon, the only writing implement he is allowed in the hospital.

He sits, his hands lying flat on the desk, palms soaking up cold from its surface just as he soaks up every last available detail from the photographs. The Pusher's face is lost to him; all he sees is a light in the dark, inching ever nearer. But there are other faces more than visible to him: those of Phillipa Goldthwaite, Barbara Lewis and Amanda Frances Green. Phillipa has her arms around her husband and a scar on her chin. Barbara sits at the head of a Formica table, flanked by two blurry children, both of them too small and energetic to stay still for the camera. Amanda slouches on the concrete steps in front of her house, a little dog resting its face in the crook of her elbow. These women had lives. They had histories. And they ended their stories, full stop, in the sunken world beneath the city they lived in, pulverized under the uncompromising bulk of a train.

Different women, same end. What else about them was the same? Will has combed through their bios, looking for the places where the threads of their lives snake and knit together. They were different ages, different races, different classes. Phillipa Goldthwaite was college-educated and married, with a history of depression. Barbara Lewis had just gotten herself and her kids out of an abusive relationship. Amanda Frances Green was a high school dropout, living with her parents and working part-time in a hardware store. They were all trying to do better.

What could he have done to them? What could he have said? Did he make them see their own lives as a cage—their families and jobs and memories the bars of their cell—and that their only escape was the train? Why didn't any of them realize that a cage has more than one way out?

Alana is watching him through the bars. He has no idea how long she has been standing there. She has her head canted thoughtfully. It's hard to tell if she likes what she sees.

“You look busy,” she says.

“I’m on a case.”

He tries on a hesitant smile, and she returns it.

She asks, “Hope I’m not interrupting?”

“You are, but I like it.”

She brings over a chair from the far wall and makes herself comfortable. “How does it feel, working with Jack again?”

“Strange,” he admits. “It’s the same old song, but some of the notes are out of tune.”

She nods. “Things can’t just return to normal, Will. It takes time to win back trust.”

“You think Jack doesn’t trust me?”

“It’s *you* who shouldn’t trust Jack. He pushed you into situations that you, sick as you were, never should have been in. You don’t have to leap back into his arms now if you don’t want to.”

Will is surprised by the animosity in Alana’s voice. Jack has made himself a real enemy. “Well then,” he says, “I take it you don’t approve of me returning to the field?”

“I shouldn’t have said that.” A little chagrined smile as Alana pulls herself together. “I don’t want my feelings about Jack to influence you, especially now that you’re working together again.”

Will is amused by Alana’s impossible attempts at removing her own bias. “It’s fine that you’re angry with Jack. Jack needs more people angry with him.”

But Alana ignores this, all professionalism again. “It’s not that I don’t approve of you returning to the field. After all, this isn’t the field, not really. Jack can’t put you in any immediate danger. And Will, this hospital, it could be *worse* for you than the field. If you’re going to survive being here, you need something to do. The work you do for Jack can be that something.”

“Frying pan and fire,” Will says, lips twisting. He senses something underneath Alana’s words. She has spoken them before: to him, to Jack. He gestures at the case file spread out behind him. “You got this for me, didn’t you?”

She cocks her head, a little playful. “I may have suggested to Jack that if he had a case he needed help with, you could be made available to him as a consultant. But Jack came away from our conversation thinking it was *his* idea, of course.”

“Of course,” Will says, grinning. It means a lot to him that Alana, despite her misgivings about his work, went to such trouble to secure it for him. “You’re a master manipulator.”

“I like to think so,” Alana says. And her air of playfulness suddenly vanishes. “Just promise me you’ll be careful. Jack failed you once. He could fail you again.”

Will turns, so that out of the corner of his eye he can see the women’s photographs again. “When I was in the field, I felt adrift, like I was drowning, and every case Jack brought me pulled me that much further under. But now—now this is the only thing keeping me afloat. How did that happen?”

Alana turns grave. “You’ve lost everything else. Everything that made you feel like yourself.”

He catches her eye. “*You* make me feel like myself.”

She smiles, that wistful smile that pulls at something tender inside him. “You make me feel like myself, too.”

They say nothing for a long moment. Will contemplates coming to the bars, reaching out, experiencing his first human touch in ages that hasn’t come from a doctor or a guard. He doesn’t get the chance. He hears the orderlies talking to someone; they are unlocking the corridor gate.

A new arrival in the hallway. Alana turns to look. Surprise, chagrin, and something unidentifiable steal across her face.

“I didn’t know you were coming today,” she says, standing up.

“My apologies.” The visitor is Hannibal, of course. “I must have got the time wrong. Please don’t let me disturb you. I will return later.”

Alana looks from Will to Hannibal (whom Will can’t see, but whose presence he feels like a splinter under a fingernail). “No,” she says, “why don’t you stay? It’s all right with me if it’s all right with Will.”

Hannibal walks forward until he enters Will’s field of vision. His coat is over his arm, his head is dipped, and there is an utterly incongruous expression of timidity on his face.

“But is it all right with Will?” he asks, his resemblance to a kicked puppy increasing by the second.

Will looks between Hannibal, who wants Will to ask him to stay, and Alana, who wants Will to ask Hannibal to stay. Will feels trapped, more trapped than usual.

“It’s fine,” he says, in a high unnatural voice.

Alana makes a move to fetch Hannibal a chair, but he places a hand on her shoulder. “Let me, Alana. Thank you.”

As he retrieves his chair, he catches Will’s eye, and places the chair—and himself—just a smidge closer to Alana than is proper. Alana doesn’t seem to notice. Will works overtime to appear as if he hasn’t noticed either.

“How are you today, Will?”

“What? Uh, fine.”

Try as he might, he can’t take his eyes away from the narrow patch of air between Alana’s knee and Hannibal’s pant leg.

“Will and I were discussing his return to fieldwork,” Alana says, with an air of forced casualness. It hasn’t escaped her attention that Will is almost vibrating with anxiety.

“Yes, of course.” Hannibal turns to Will. “Tell me, how does it feel to be back in the field?”

As he says this, his eyes move past Will to the desk, where the crime scene photographs lie exposed on its surface. Will instantly recoils, as if something disgusting has brushed him. Without a word he turns his back on his visitors and gathers up the photos as quickly as he can. These women have been through enough without enduring desecration from Hannibal.

“Will, what are you doing?” Alana asks.

“Just cleaning up,” he says in that high strained voice.

“He doesn’t want me to see what he’s working on,” says Hannibal.

Will busies himself with the photographs, but he can feel a significant look passing between his visitors.

“Dr. Lecter is still your psychiatrist,” Alana says after a moment. “You shouldn’t feel you have to hide anything from him.”

“We all hide things, even from our psychiatrists,” Will says, “Don’t we, Dr. Lecter?”

Hannibal doesn’t take the bait. “There was a time when you weren’t afraid to share the details of your cases with me. You even allowed me to help.”

“Yeah, you were so helpful.” Will sweeps the photos back into their envelope and closes it with a snap.

“I like to think I was,” Hannibal says. “I like to think I was something like your sounding board. You voiced your theories to me, and with my small contributions, you reshaped your thinking, refined it, perfected it.”

Will has to fold his fingers in his lap to stop them from shaking. “Well, I don’t need any more of your ‘contributions’, thank you.”

Hannibal hangs his head as if this statement has caused him physical pain. Alana sees it, is touched by it. Poor Hannibal. How bravely he endures abuse from Will. When she speaks, there is steel in her voice.

“What do you see, Will, when you look at Dr. Lecter?”

Will refuses to look at him, but he says: “I see the man who put me here.”

Hannibal sighs, as if all this is too much for him.

“I want you to look at Dr. Lecter, Will,” Alana says. “Please indulge me for a moment and just look him in the eye.”

Will’s head feels as though it is made of iron, but he lifts it, slowly. When he looks at Hannibal, he sees that Hannibal has somehow managed to move his chair even closer to Alana than before.

Alana speaks slowly and carefully, not taking her eyes off Will. “Dr. Lecter is here because you’ve asked for him to be here. He’s not here to hurt you, or to trick you, or to sabotage you in any way. He’s here because he wants to help you. Do you believe what I’m telling you is the truth, Will?”

Hannibal’s eyes are gleaming. Maybe to Alana he looks like someone overcome with the desire to be helpful. To Will’s eyes, he just looks hungry.

“If your answer to that question is no,” Alana continues, “then you shouldn’t see Hannibal any more. And he shouldn’t see you.” She directs this last to Hannibal, who nods his understanding, as if this wise advice weren’t the complete antithesis of everything he’s working for.

Will wants to scream and scream. He sees it all as it is. Hannibal is fixing the game. He is arranging things so Will can’t speak his mind: not to Jack, not to anyone. If he tells Alana he thinks Hannibal is a serial killer, she will stop him from seeing Hannibal. Will is faced with an awful choice: if he keeps speaking truthfully to the host of people who don’t believe him, he sacrifices his opportunity to speak to the only person who does. Will can’t bear to lose Hannibal. Separation from Hannibal will destroy his anger, and his anger is keeping him alive.

In a strangled voice he says, “He’s here to help me. I know it.”

Alana lets out a breath of relief. She thinks of this as progress.

Hannibal’s face doesn’t change, but Will still sees pleasure there, dark pleasure in emanating waves.

“And do you want the help I offer?” he asks Will.

Will can’t speak. There is a meaty obstruction in his throat. He settles for a nod.

“Will,” Hannibal says gently, “It’s all right if you don’t believe yet. But some day you will. Some day you will be able to look at me and see that I am not this monster from your nightmares, but a human being who has always wanted what is best for you.”

Will says nothing. He is staring at that narrowing place where their knees are almost touching. Is this in his imagination? No, it can’t be.

“Now,” Hannibal says, “do you want to tell me about the work you’re doing with Jack Crawford?”

The honest answer is absolutely not. So Will evades. “What do you think of me going back to work for Jack?”

Hannibal knows Will is dodging him, but he accepts the change of subject. “I admit I have reservations.”

“Fancy that,” Will says, voice colorless. He feels Alana watching him, willing him to play nice.

Hannibal nods at her. “I defer to Dr. Bloom’s judgment, of course, but my opinion is that you should be spending this time on your recovery, not forcing yourself back into the minds of killers. You know you lose yourself in the work you do. I would hate to see this Subway Pusher become a distraction for you, for him to keep you from concentrating on what is truly important.”

Will registers Hannibal’s name drop, and understands by it that Hannibal already knows the details of the Pusher case, undoubtedly from Jack. Hannibal is telling Will in so many words that there is nothing Will can hide from him, that there is no point in trying.

“According to you,” Will growls, “there’s only one killer whose mind I should be living in.”

Alana and Hannibal exchange a look. “That’s right,” Hannibal says, nodding. “Your own mind.”

Will is staring at Hannibal, committing murder with his eyes. “Did Jack tell you what I get in return for my help with the Subway Pusher?”

Hannibal’s face is inscrutable. “Your file.”

“Have any ‘reservations’ about that?”

“No,” Hannibal says, immediately. “I have always thought it necessary to your recovery. Ever since you emerged from deep sedation I have argued that you be given access to the details of the case against you, but others”—he bows his head politely at Alana—“have deemed this inadvisable.”

“I didn’t think you were ready to be exposed to that information,” Alana says, “Frankly, I still don’t think you’re ready. You endured a trauma, Will. That’s why you don’t remember it. It’s your mind’s way of trying to protect you.”

“Is my mind protecting me?” Will asks. “Or are you?”

Alana accepts this without protest. “I’m protecting you, too. But if you want the file, I won’t stop you from looking at it. And if you want to talk about it, I’m willing to listen.”

“As am I,” says Hannibal. “Just as I am willing to listen to your opinions on this Pusher. How does he view himself? Why convince these poor women to throw themselves under trains?”

Inside Will's mind he issues Amanda, Barbara, and Phillipa a silent apology. Then he surrenders, allowing himself to fall back into that (comfortingly) familiar back-and-forth, as he discusses the vagaries of murder with Hannibal.

Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

Hannibal pushes.

The woman in white at the platform's edge. She turns again, darts that searching look over her shoulder. She finds him—she finds his eyes. What is she looking for? The confidence she needs so she can do what must be done? Or is she pleading with him, begging him one last time to reconsider? Will doesn't know. All he knows is that she looks. She *needs* to look.

"It interests me," Hannibal says, "that on this case you feel more kinship with the victims than with their killer."

Will comes back to himself. Hannibal and Alana are still there, still sitting too close together, still watching him. Will shakes his head, brushing off Hannibal's suggestion.

"It's not kinship," he says. "It's curiosity. I want to understand them."

"Do you think of yourself as a victim, Will?"

"No." He answers immediately, wanting to get back to business.

A shift in Hannibal's expression. "As a killer, then?"

"No."

Earlier Will resisted discussion of the Subway Pusher case, but now he finds it's the only subject he cares to talk to Hannibal about. He is very aware of Alana's presence, her watchful silence.

He tries to stay calm and on topic as he says, "If I'm going to help Jack then I need to know who these women were. Their frame of mind is more important to me than the scene of the crime."

"Perhaps you find it safer to empathize with the victims," Hannibal says, "rather than exposing yourself to the thoughts of their killer. It's your last defense, your way of protecting

yourself from re-experiencing the thrill of murder."

Will ignores this, and wishes Alana would ignore it too, but he can see her contemplating and giving credence to Hannibal's words. When Will tries to imply Hannibal is a murderer, Alana treats him as if he has said something unreasonable. But when Hannibal implies Will is a murderer, Alana drinks it in.

Will wrenches himself back to the case, speaks in a voice just shy of a shout. "The Pusher's victims made the decision to jump. They died by choice. *Their* choice, not the Pusher's. If we can understand that choice, if we can understand *them*, then maybe we can catch their killer."

Up until now Alana has been content to observe Will and Hannibal's discussion without participating. But now she clears her throat. "They may not have felt they had a choice. These women… they may have been despondent, Will. Beyond saving."

Hannibal angles his head at Alana. "You are suggesting a suicide pact?"

"These weren't suicides," Will says, before she can answer.

"They could be suicides," Alana says. "Didn't one of the victims have clinical depression?"

Will feels nettled. "Phillipa Goldthwaite. But she had treatment, it was under control. She was doing better."

"You know recovery can often be a truce, not a victory," Alana says. Will's skin prickles at her gentle tone. Alana isn't talking about just Phillipa Goldthwaite.

"A suicide pact," Hannibal repeats, pretending to weigh this theory; the mocking twist of his mouth suggests he doesn't believe a word of it. "No pusher at all. Just these women and their pain."

"It wasn't a pact," Will snaps. "These women didn't know each other. There's no connection."

Will is losing his temper, but Hannibal remains as smooth as glass. "But you hypothesize that the Pusher knew each of these women individually?"

"They didn't kill themselves because they were depressed!" Will presses his fists into his thighs for emphasis. "They killed themselves because the Pusher forced them to. He talked them into it. *How would he do that*?" He spits this last question at Hannibal with almost violent force.

"Will…" says Alana.

"How would he do it?" Will repeats, ignoring her.

Hannibal looks reticent, under attack. "I couldn't say for certain."

Will rubs his face in frustration. "I'm not asking you to say for certain. I'm asking for your *professional* opinion. If you were the Pusher, how would you talk these women into

jumping?"

"Will," Alana says, again. "Try to calm down."

Will barely hears her. He is so invested in Hannibal's answer that he's having trouble breathing. Because Hannibal would know, wouldn't he? If anyone could persuade someone to leap in front of a train, Hannibal could.

"It's all right," Hannibal says to Alana, laying one hand gently on her wrist. He turns back to Will, calm and collected and helpful as always. "If I were the Pusher," he says, "I suppose I would have to present the train to my victims as the more desirable of two appalling options. The lesser of two evils."

Will leans forward. "And what's the greater evil?"

Both he and Alana are staring at Hannibal. He hunches a little under the force of their attention, his expression apologetic, but his voice is cool and neutral as he speaks of horrors.

"All three of the victims had families, did they not? Parents, husbands, children. Perhaps if the Pusher's victims hadn't hurled themselves in front of the train—an action that doesn't necessarily result in death—something even worse might have befallen their families."

Yes. Of course. Under Will's breath, without thinking, he says, "Amazing, what you can make people do, when they believe that harm may come to those they love."

As if in response, Hannibal narrows the distance between himself and Alana.

"You think they committed suicide to protect their families?" Alana asks skeptically. She re-crosses her legs, perhaps a subconscious reaction to Hannibal's encroachment on her personal space. "How would that work? The Pusher would have to have considerable resources and sway for the victims to believe their families were in real physical danger. He'd need to be someone with connections in organized crime."

Will shakes his head. "If someone from a criminal syndicate wanted these women dead, he would've made their deaths look accidental. He wouldn't have dressed them up in identical clothing, linking the crimes."

"He didn't necessarily have to put their families in physical danger," says Hannibal. "There are other ways to threaten and destroy."

Understanding leaps instantly from Hannibal to Will; he feels it as a shiver coursing over him. He says: "Information cuts deeper than any knife."

"The preservation of secrets," Hannibal says, with the smallest of smiles. "A very strong push indeed."

"Throw yourself in front of a train, rather than have the people whose opinions you value think the worst of you?" Will says.

Hannibal nods. "A blackmailer who accepts only death as his payment."

They speak quickly, breathlessly, the idea pounding into shape between them. Alana's eyes flick back-and-forth, back-and-forth as if following a tennis match.

"He may not be a crime boss," Will says, "but he's someone with power. Or at least with power behind him. Authority."

"He had access to the most personal details of these women's lives," Hannibal says.

"They knew him," Will says. "When he said he'd tell their families if they didn't jump, they believed him. He's someone they confided in, someone they trusted, or used to trust."

"A social worker," Hannibal suggests.

"Or a psychiatrist," says Will.

As soon as he says it, he knows it's a mistake. Their duet breaks down, and disharmony reigns anew.

Hannibal takes a long inhale through his nose. "Ah. I thought we might come to that."

"I'm not suggesting you're the Subway Pusher," Will says.

"Aren't you?" Hannibal says, but he's looking at Alana.

"You should get some rest, Will," she says. She smoothes down her skirt as she stands up. "You can't eat, sleep, and breathe this case."

"I—I—I *know* he's not the Subway Pusher," Will says, with panic effervescing in his veins. Hannibal has steered him into a dark corner and left him there, with Alana watching all the while. Who knows what she thinks of him now?

"I know he's not, Alana," he says again, trying not to stammer. "I do know."

"I know," she says quietly, with a tight smile. "It's all right. We'll talk about it next time." As Hannibal helps her with her coat, she leans into his ear and whispers, "But you I'd like to talk to *right now*."

"Certainly," says Hannibal, folding his own coat back over his arm. "Please take care of yourself, Will. Until we meet again."

Will says nothing. The sight of the pair of them, standing there with their coats, wishing him goodnight, it makes him feel like a child whose parents are abandoning him with the babysitter while they glide off to their moonlit revelries. God, what an image; what perverse corner of his mind gave birth to that? He realizes he's still staring at them, and that they are waiting in increasingly anxious silence for him to acknowledge their goodbyes.

Without a word, he turns and throws himself down on his cot. After a moment he hears their footsteps receding down the corridor in perfect synchronicity.

His head is spinning. He might be sick. Hannibal holds two fingers against Alana's elbow as they walk together up the corridor. But Will can't see that, he is face down on his cot. And yet he sees it, sees it clearly. Sees the disappointment and shock in Alana's face, the satisfaction under the mask of solicitude on Hannibal's. Again he sees them in front of his cell, sitting close together, close enough to feel the heat from each other's bodies. He has to stop. One little nudge and his imagination runs amuck. This is Hannibal's design.

The Pusher manipulates his victims by threatening to use their secrets, their past mistakes, to turn their families against them. The only family Will has is the FBI and Alana. And Hannibal, slowly but surely, has laced their thoughts with poison.

A roar in Will's ears. The train is coming. The train thunders through the Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane. It tears through wall after wall, bricks crumbling to dust in its wake. The headlights blast through the hospital's perpetual gloom. They shine through Will's closed lids; he sees the vivid red of blood. The train smashes the bars of Will's cell and then it smashes him.

But the train is only in Will's mind. Hannibal never gave him any choice. The Pusher is a kinder man than Hannibal.

The pendulum swings. He is Hannibal Lecter and he sits with Alana Bloom in front of the fireplace in his office. He is admiring the interplay of light and shadow across the stirring canvas that is her anxious face. He watches the elegant way her fingers twist and twist around her glass of wine.

"He seems like himself one moment and like someone else the next. Between his illness and that *place*…what if we're losing him?"

He takes a sip of his wine, pretending to need time to compose himself, to compose his answer, when really he just requires a few more seconds to appreciate her distress.

Then he says, "Will lost himself during his illness, and now he is fighting his way back to himself. The rediscovery of who he is, it's something Will must do for himself, Alana. Our help can only take him so far."

"I saw him when he was sick," Alana says, shaking her head, "and he was never like this." She looks up at him, her eyes wide. "The way he spoke to you…like you're some kind of *monster*."

Hannibal sighs. Alana responds to vulnerability, to victimhood. It is becoming easy for him to assume this shape for her. "Will trusted me once. He feels he trusted me too completely, shared too much of himself with me, so much so that now he must punish me for it."

“I still think you should stop seeing him,” says Alana, her voice throaty with emotion. “It’s doing neither of you any good.”

“If I remain patient, and resolute, I believe I can do him some good,” Hannibal says, with an air of quiet heroism. “I won’t give up on him. I believe you and I have that in common.”

“We do,” she says softly.

“But seeing him like this…it is unspeakably painful.”

“It is.”

“It hurts me,” he says, “to see you in pain.”

She only looks at him. He can see the firelight in her eyes.

“You care about Will very deeply,” he says.

And slowly she nods.

“I admire you, for the way you are able to balance your personal feelings with your professional responsibilities.”

“I’m not balanced,” Alana says. “Maybe I was, once. But now I’ve gone decidedly lopsided. I’m too close to him, Hannibal. I worry I’m hurting him by involving myself in his case. He needs a champion who doesn’t…” She looks away, embarrassed. “…Who doesn’t have a personal stake in his innocence.”

“You are the best champion he could ever ask for,” Hannibal says, with feeling.

“I try to be.”

He leans forward. “It is in your nature to be a caregiver, Alana. That is why you are such an effective therapist. You care, and care deeply. You needn’t apologize for that. But at some point, in order to remain a successful caregiver, you must accept that you need care in return.”

“I have a psychiatrist,” Alana says. “You’ve had him to dinner.”

Hannibal puts down his wine. He takes her hand. “My dear Dr. Bloom, I’m not talking about psychiatry…”

Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

The case isn't the only thing that's cracking.

Chapter Notes

Apologies for the delay! I hope this super-sized installment makes up for it.

He wakes up—at least, he tries to. Overnight his anger has hardened inside him like drying cement. He feels sluggish, stultified, his imagination at its lowest ebb.

He sits up in bed, presses his cheek against the cold brick. He doesn't have the energy to stand, let alone to sit at his desk and re-examine his case notes on the Pusher.

"You all right, Mr. Graham?"

Barney peers at him through the bars. No tray or pills in hand, no apparent reason for him to be there.

Right now the power of speech is a power too great for Will, so he just nods.

"You were shouting in your sleep last night," Barney says. "You been having nightmares?"

He is Hannibal Lecter and he is leaning towards Alana Bloom. He caresses the delicate skin underneath her chin and she doesn't pull away.

There are many kinds of nightmares, some more insidious than others.

"Never stopped," Will rasps.

Barney nods. "Kevin, the night orderly, said you were loud enough to disturb your row. I told him I'd make a report to Dr. Chilton, but then it slipped my mind. It happens with a demanding job like mine. Incidents fall through the cracks sometimes."

Will summons the energy to meet the other man's eyes. "Thank you, Barney."

The orderly shrugs; Will's gratitude is a non-issue for him. He does what he does because he thinks it's right, not out of the expectation of some reward. His eyes drift to the paperwork stacked around Will's desk. "How's the case coming along?"

It's Will's turn to shrug. His dreams have muddled him. Right now the Pusher feels very remote, a shadow of a shadow.

Barney gives him a long, considering look. He says: "Everyone inside this place wishes they had the power to make things happen out there." He gestures towards the outer wall, a stand-in for the world at large. "If you got that power, you have to cherish it. Use it. Or else you won't hold on to it for long."

He taps on the bars as he turns to leave. "You crack that case, Mr. Graham."

It's exactly the kind of pep talk Will needs. He rouses himself, forces his nightmares to a corner of his mind, and begins combing through the evidence again, searching for the secrets the Pusher could have used to blackmail his victims. The problem with this approach is that secrets don't usually leave paper trails. If these women were having affairs, there's no evidence of it in their final movements. Only Amanda Frances Green had a police record; she was arrested for shoplifting when she was a teenager. Barbara Lewis's relationship with her abusive boyfriend was well-documented—domestic disturbance citations, restraining orders, counseling—which is precisely why the Pusher wouldn't have been able to use it against her. Phillipa Goldthwaite had her depression, but no past sins to speak of. The women didn't share a social worker or a therapist or a doctor. The Pusher is either someone never officially assigned to the victims, or he is someone else entirely.

Will has hit a block. There is a traitorous part of him that wants nothing more than to talk this out with Hannibal. But he chokes down the urge. Yes, Hannibal might be able to help—but without a doubt his help will *hurt*.

His fingers twitch for a keyboard, for the ease of being able to search VICAP in a matter of seconds, call up NYPD records, arrange a second interview with the victims' families and friends. All these aspects of the investigation that he used to take for granted—and in the case of the interviews, actively dreaded—and now he can't proceed without them.

Instead he is dependent on visits from the FBI. According to the clock across from the inmate Faria's cell, Jack is two hours late for their scheduled sit-down. It's a long drive up from Quantico, Will tells himself. Jack will get around to him eventually.

The afternoon dwindles and he runs out of things to do. The case is at a dead end and so is he. His imagination begins to slip its bonds again. The fireplace in Hannibal's office gutters in the wall beyond Will's bars, throwing light across his face. He sees two silhouettes, moving closer and closer together, until they become one silhouette—*stop*. He shuts the thinking down by biting his fingernails, a habit he kicked as a teenager, but captivity has triggered a relapse. They keep his nails so short in here that he doesn't even have anything to chew, but that doesn't stop him from gnawing to the quick.

Beverly finally arrives a little after six o'clock. She takes the long stroll down the dark hospital corridor with no Jack or Price or Zeller to accompany her. *And then there was one*, Will thinks, as she approaches the bars.

"Where's Jack?"

"In New York," she says, mouth a grim line. "There's been another jumper."

Will's fears confirmed. He lets out a shivery huff.

"Sasha Novak." Beverly passes a file through the bars to him. "She jumped in front of the 2:30am Q train at the Union Square station."

Will looks through the photographs, eyes skating over the mangled limbs, the white dress saturated with blood. He could have prevented this.

"She have a family?" he asks, quietly.

"She had a baby three months ago."

He swallows. "What about a police record?"

"A drug charge from years back. And she put herself through nursing school working as an escort."

Will takes this in. "Does her family know she was in the sex trade?"

Beverly's eyes are dark. "They do now."

Will sees it. Her boyfriend, skin taut over his blank face, already numbed by grief, questioned by Jack on the subject of his girlfriend's past life. The woman he thought he knew. Death has turned her into a stranger.

"It wouldn't have been enough to make her jump," he says. "She would have known it would come out after her death." He looks down at the smiling face of Sasha Novak in a photograph taken at her nursing school graduation. "There was something more, something we're not seeing." He looks back up at Beverly. "Could any of the other victims have worked as escorts?"

"It's possible," she says. "We're looking into it. You think the Pusher is a pimp? Or someone else in the trade?"

He shakes his head. "Pimps are violent. Petty. This isn't someone who cares about money. He did this out of principle. The white dresses, it's like he was trying to purify them."

"By blackmailing them to jump under a train?"

He nods.

"You're sure?"

He hears skepticism in her voice. He has made a lot of outrageous assertions in his time with the FBI, but this is the first time Beverly has ever second-guessed him. “Sure I’m sure,” he says, rubbing his face. “Though how can I be sure of anything when I’m locked away in here?”

“Hey,” Beverly says, and Will opens his eyes and sees that she has moved closer to the bars, closer than she has ever been when coming to visit him. “You can’t beat yourself up over this. There’s only so much you can do. We’re the people out there who should have been able to stop this.”

Beverly means well, but her words only amplify his feelings of powerlessness.

“I could solve this faster if I was out there with you,” he says.

“Yeah, well, I could solve this faster with a new mass spectrometer and an officer posted in every subway station. We gotta make do.” She draws a notebook out of her pocket. “Here’s something that might help. This time we’ve got a list of all the witnesses on the platform when Sasha Novak jumped.”

Will takes it from her. It’s a long scribbled list, more than thirty names and addresses. His heart leaps.

“How were you able to get this?” he asks. “You must have worked fast to keep them from leaving the scene.”

“We got lucky. A man on the platform noticed Sasha Novak. He saw her white dress and remembered the news reports. He got help from a NYPD officer who happened to be there—there’s been a string of muggings at this station, so the Transit Bureau had him on patrol. They ran after Sasha and tried to stop her, but there wasn’t time to prevent her from jumping. But at least the NYPD locked the scene down pretty quick.” She watches him thumb through the notebook. “You think the Pusher could be on that list?”

“He was on the platform,” Will says. “And he’s bold. He wouldn’t have slipped away. He’s here.”

They spend the next two hours cross-referencing the witness list on VICAP. Beverly sits on the floor with her back to Will’s cell, her laptop balanced on her crossed legs so he can see the screen. They don’t come up with anything case-breaking, but Will still feels bolstered by the activity. Hovering over Beverly’s shoulder, watching her send queries to the Department of Records, he is directly involved in the search, far more involved than when Jack pushed photographs through the bars of his cell as if offering peanuts to a chimp. For once Will feels not like a freak or a killer, but like an investigator. Hannibal has never been further from his mind.

At nine o’clock, Barney politely informs them that visiting hours are over.

“Wow.” Beverly rubs her eyes. “I lost track of time.”

“Easy to do down here,” Will says, with a sad smile. He doesn’t want her to go.

“I’ll run all this past Jack,” she says as she stores her laptop. “He’s flying back to Dulles tonight. Hopefully he’ll have more for you in the morning.”

Sleep comes easier that night. He has no desire to be Hannibal, because for once he doesn’t mind being himself. He hasn’t solved the case, but he can feel an answer flitting at the fringes of his thoughts. He wakes up before the sun rises and goes back to work.

Say that Sasha Novak, Phillipa Goldthwaite, Barbara Lewis, and Amanda Frances Green all worked for a time as escorts. Could they have been a part of something against their will? Could they have witnessed something so terrible that they left the trade as soon as they could? They started new lives. They thought they had put it behind them. Until one day someone comes along, someone they once knew, and threatens to expose them…

“Hello, Will,” says Hannibal.

Will doesn’t look up from his notes. “I don’t have time for you today.”

Hannibal tenses, a spring slowly coiling.

“Of course,” he says. “I see you are working. I wouldn’t want to distract you.”

“Distract me?” Will keeps his head down, his eyes on his desk, but he can’t stop himself from sneering. “*Never*. I have more important things to do than talk to you. Don’t you have other patients?”

Hannibal stays where he is, head tilted, watching Will like he is a particularly interesting bacterial smear in a petri dish.

“I’m really kind of busy here,” Will snarls. “I’m not doing any role-playing today. No party tricks. Go try your mind games on someone else. Well? *Go*.”

A ripple in the dark pool of Hannibal’s eyes. “You’re being rude, Will.”

“Am I?” Now he lets himself look Hannibal straight in the eye. “Well, what are you gonna do about it? Kill me?”

The skin around Hannibal’s mouth tightens.

“I will return at a more convenient time,” he says. “Good luck with your case.”

Will goes through the witness list again. Thirty-five names. Twenty-three men, twelve women. No real red flags. Parking tickets, minor charges, but nothing involving sex trafficking. None of the witnesses have connections to the victims. The Pusher was on that platform, hiding in plain sight. But is he hiding on this list?

Will sees Sasha Novak walking across the platform, her white dress glowing whenever she passes under the overhead lights. She passes a man wearing a baseball cap low on his head. He notices her. Will watches realization flood his face. The man takes a step towards her, ready to help her himself. But then he sees an NYPD officer, and runs to him instead.

He runs to him instead…

A nascent thought, the connections slowly multiplying. Will goes back to Phillipa Goldthwaite. He looks through the information Jack provided for him on the Queens station where she jumped. There was a shooting at that station six days before Phillipa Goldthwaite came there to die. His heart begins to pound. He pulls out the files for Barbara Lewis and Amanda Frances Green. He finds what he's looking for and his heart pounds harder.

He scrawls the word VICE in crayon across the top of his notes and looks up at Faria's clock. Nine-thirty. Jack was supposed to be here at nine.

He calls for Barney. When Barney doesn't immediately emerge from the orderly station, Will starts yelling. The sounds rile up the other prisoners: "Shuddup, Dr. Graham!" "What's up, Doc?" "Dr. Graham needs a popper. Anyone got a popper for Dr. Graham?"

Finally Barney makes the trip down the hallway, and he doesn't look happy when he gets there.

"You got the whole place hopping," he says. "You know I'm not your concierge."

"I need a phone," Will says. "I have to talk to someone at the FBI. It's important."

"IT'S IMPORTANT!" howls Mel Himmel in cell twelve. "IT'S IMPORTAAAANT!"

Will cringes at the floor. "I'm sorry," he says to Barney, and Barney softens.

"I'll talk to Dr. Chilton. But if anyone else asks, you need to call your lawyer, all right? It'll play better with the doctor."

Will nods. But two hours pass and Barney doesn't return.

Will starts biting his nails again.

He waits and waits. His elation at having cracked the case degenerates into gray frustration. The Pusher pulses inside his skull, begging for release. It is torture to know something and have no one to tell.

Barney comes back without a phone. Chilton won't authorize the call, claiming he needs approval from the hospital's board of directors first.

"Jesus," Will growls. "Tell him lives are at stake here. This is *obstruction*."

Barney merely hums his understanding.

Will paces his cell, violence singing in his veins. It's bullshit, rank and stupid bullshit. Chilton knows he wants to call Jack. The hospital director hasn't forgiven either of them for chasing him out of the investigation the last time Jack visited. Chilton is nothing, a mincing martinet, but he knows he has a finger on Will's buttons, and he can't stop himself from pressing them. Dr. Gideon, that pale ghost of serial killer, should have done a more thorough job cleaving out the man's gastro-intestinal tract.

Afternoon gives way to evening. No one from the FBI has come. Barney said that Will has power over what happens on the outside, but right now Will doesn't feel like he has any power at all. He feels demoralized, ill-used. Where is Jack? Why ask for Will's help if the man can't be bothered to come get it?

He chews his nails. Without an outlet his mind becomes a pressure cooker. Again the fireplace in Hannibal's office springs to life on the corridor wall across from his cell. Will watches Hannibal stroke the white flesh of Alana's arm. He leans in close enough to smell her hair, and gently presses his lips to her neck. After a moment's hesitation she slides her arms around his back, curls her fingers into his shirt, rucking up the silk—

Will bites down, tastes copper. Two of his nail beds are exposed, red-raw and bleeding.

"I'll take that, Mr. Graham, if you're not going to eat it," Barney says.

Will hides his bloody fingers. He sees a dinner tray in front of him, although he doesn't remember anyone delivering it.

"We'll get you that phone call, Mr. Graham," Barney says, as he takes the tray away.

At some point that night he loses patience with full consciousness and devolves into some half-mast state of unease and strange imaginings. He is wearing his tweed blazer and his glasses, sitting at Hannibal's dining table, and the room is suffused with ominous shadows deeper and sweeter than the shadows of the real world. Jack sits across from him; Alana sits by Will's side. She is wearing a white dress. Beverly, Price and Zeller are there, too. Even Chilton has been invited to this dinner party, seated at the table's foot. And at its head, Hannibal.

"Bon appétit," he says, as he removes the cover from a serving dish.

The food is as Will remembers it: sumptuous and intricately arranged, its beauty stark and almost sinister. These high-flown dishes always intimidated him, the platters and the sauces and the little forks, the garnishes that for some reason need a garnish of their own. All that effort, and for what? It all just gets eaten in the end.

The others make soft noises of appreciation and pleasure. Hannibal, the consummate host, leaves his own plate untouched as he watches his guests enjoy their meal. He observes them, his eyes glittering so brightly he could be on the point of tears.

Will doesn't eat.

"Don't be rude, Will," Jack says. "You've gotta eat your dinner."

"I just want…" But Will can't remember what he wants. He is distracted by the noises the others are making as they eat. Chilton is being almost obscenely vocal.

"I think…" Will mutters. "I think I'm waiting for a train?"

The others don't seem to hear him.

"Aren't you hungry?" Alana asks, as she carves up her carpaccio.

Hannibal turns his penetrating gaze on Will. "He's hungry," he says.

Will looks down and sees his plate is bleeding. Dark arterial blood seeps out from underneath the porcelain. "Oh," he says, slowly.

The other plates are bleeding, too. The stains are slowly spreading over the bleached surface of the tablecloth.

"Don't stand on ceremony," Hannibal says to him. "I insist you eat."

Will shakes his head.

The other guests don't mind the blood. Little dots fall into the lap of Alana's white dress, but she spreads her napkin over them and continues eating. Jack takes a sip of cabernet and says, "Mmmm. You're missing out, Will." Zeller whispers something in Beverly's ear and she laughs. She lifts her forearm from the table; it is smeared with blood. "You've outdone yourself tonight, Dr. Lecter," says Chilton, smacking his lips.

"Eat, Will," Hannibal says, the barest hint of a growl in his voice.

"I'd rather not." Will moves his chair away from the table to avoid the rivulets of blood. Why is he the only one who sees?

Suddenly Hannibal is right behind Will, and he begins sliding Will's chair back towards the table. A wave of hot blood falls over Will's knees. Hannibal presses a fork into Will's limp hand, closes the fingers with bruising force, and begins guiding their locked fists towards Will's plate.

Will tries to pull away, but Hannibal's hold on him is ruthless. "No," he says. "No, please. *Stop*."

Like a puppeteer Hannibal makes him spear his meat and raise the fork to his mouth. Will turns his head away, but Hannibal grabs his hair and drags him back.

Jack looks up and shakes his head at Will in weary bemusement. Alana takes a long drink of wine. The others politely ignore the struggle going on in front of them.

Will shuts his eyes, feels the cold touch of the meat against his lips. When he next opens his eyes, he sees that impaled on the end of the fork is a severed ear, delicate and faintly purple. The cartilage folds insistently against his teeth.

Hannibal pinches Will's nose, forcing him to open his mouth. "Shhhh," he says, because Will is screaming. "It will all be over in a moment."

Will tastes copper. The room is spinning. Something rubbery wriggles down his throat. He gags. The dogs are barking loud.

He wakes up and knows he has been screaming, because his throat is raw and the other prisoners are laughing and emitting high pitched squeals in imitation. He can't sort out his own emotions, they are a dizzying rumble of disgust and triumph. The dream was horrifying, but a part of it was real, which means that somewhere inside him lie the real memories of what Hannibal did to him.

But disgust wins out for now. He rolls off the cot and retches in the toilet.

Jack arrives exactly one day late.

"Where were you?" Will asks, before Jack can even say hello.

"Office of Professional Responsibility wanted to see me," Jack says, darkly. "You know that, Will. I called you."

"You called Chilton. Not me."

"He didn't give you the message?" Jack shakes his head. "I'm gonna have some words with that doctor." He looks Will over. "So what do you have for me?"

It falls so far short of an apology that Will comes close to losing it.

"What do I have for you?" he asks, shaking his head. "What do I *have* for you?"

Jack looks startled. "You all right? You're looking sick again. Glazed."

"I'm fine," Will snaps.

Jack shakes his head. "I'm gonna have more than a few words with that doctor. Chilton's got you tranked up to Timbuktu."

Will waves this away. It's not medication he cares about right now. "Jack, I need to know if Victor Hodge ever worked in Vice."

Jack seems to think he's speaking gibberish. "Victor Who?"

Will slams his fist on the bars in frustration. “Victor *Hodge*, the NYPD officer who was first on the scene for Sasha Novak!”

“Why’s that important?”

Will digs his throbbing fingers into his palms, a shaky attempt at staying calm. “It’s *important* because there were Transit Police at every station where the Pusher struck. All four of them. Why would the Pusher deliberately pick stations that were being watched?”

Jack’s eyes go wide. “Because he was the one doing the watching.”

Will nods. “The Pusher’s a cop. This cop, Victor Hodge. He was on the platform with Sasha Novak. Close enough that the man who spotted her ran to Hodge for help instead of going straight for the jumper. Now, did Hodge used to work in Vice, or didn’t he? If he did, then that’s how he knew the victims. If he worked in Vice, then he’s our guy.”

Jack has out his cell phone before Will has finished speaking. “I need employment history on an officer with the NYPD.” Will hands him a sheet off the case file before Jack can ask. “Hodge,” he reads. “Transit Bureau. Badge number 8457. That’s right. Let me ask you something. Hodge ever do any work for the Vice unit?”

Will is right up at the bars.

“All right.” Jack’s mouth becomes a hard line.

He terminates the call. “Three years in Vice,” he tells Will, and before the words are out of his mouth he is striding away, phone pressed to his ear as he summons the cavalry.

Will watches him go, not expecting a goodbye or a thank you or anything else from Jack. He knows that a cracked case inspires a curious kind of tunnel vision, a frantic scramble as the manhunt begins. Shouted phone calls, blaring sirens. Jack kicking in doors with his shotgun at the ready. The intoxication of a chase. Will feels it too, a distant echo of Jack’s thrill. But as Jack strides through the corridor gate, the feeling fades.

Will won’t be there for the chase. He won’t look into Hodge’s eyes when he is found. He won’t hear an explanation for the Pusher’s crimes, at least not from the Pusher’s own mouth. There was a time when he would have been happy to be spared from the front lines.

His reconstruction is only partial, expressionistic, a hectic smear of frustration and rage. He experiences Hodge’s impotence, his self-righteousness. A soldier not allowed to fight his war. Bumped down from Vice to Transit, exiled to the bowels of the city, Hodge feels persecuted by his own precinct, chewed down to a nub by the very system he has sworn to uphold. All that bureaucracy, all that bullshit—so why not begin his own private crusade?

Will can identify with that.

So Hodge decides to become a martyr for a cause that only he can see, but that’s not enough, so he recruits other martyrs to join him. The women he met back in Vice.

Whatever terrible crimes Hodge used to blackmail his victims, he'll take those secrets to his grave. That's what he promised the women he'd do, and Hodge is a man of his word. He won't be taken alive.

Will sees it even though it hasn't happened yet. The SWAT team pushing their way through the turnstiles. Jack running down the steps, his long coat flapping behind him. "Stop!" he shouts to Victor Hodge, but he's too late. Hodge is at the platform's edge and the train is coming. Jack's face stark in the train's highbeams. Hodge suspended for a microsecond in the air, his badge winking in the light, but then the moment of grace expires. The train runs him down.

Will sits heavily at the end of his cot. He folds his bitten fingers in his lap. Silence on the cellblock.

The next time he sees Jack, there are two files under his arm. One is a new case—*of course* there's a new case, as if Jack would ever let him off that easily. But at least Jack is a man of his word. The other file is Will's own.

Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

Three psychiatrists. Three arguments. Will wins zero of them.

A series of little privileges pad out the hard surface of his life. The orderlies now trust him with a safety razor every other morning. *The Washington Post* arrives daily with his breakfast, and he can request whatever additional reading material he likes. In his cell currently: Flannery O'Connor, John Ashbery, Boating World Magazine, plus several books on horse racing. This last is for the new case he's working: a jockey and his horse both found stuffed and mounted, one astride the other, inside a Kentucky stable. The taxidermy manuals he's ordered are still in transit.

He is given one hour every week in a concrete room, where he is chained in front of a flickery terminal on which he can use the Internet—heavily monitored, of course. He imagines Dr. Chilton reviewing his history with a fine-toothed comb, and refrains from Googling anything revealing. Freedom may look like freedom, but in here it's still a trap.

As promised, Jack browbeats Chilton into cutting down on Will's meds. Slowly the world sharpens and brightens, for better and worse. Better, because Will becomes aware of how the drugs fogged him up, discombobulating him to the point where he was inventing whole histories in the gap between two legs. Now, with his eyes opened, he can stop himself (most of the time) from getting swept up in unfounded fantasies of Alana and Hannibal. But with sobriety comes a keener awareness of time: days and hours and minutes no longer pass him by. Instead he feels every second as it grinds along, each eroding some tiny fraction of his patience.

With a roll of newly acquired Scotch tape, he sticks the photographs from his own case file on the wall above his bed: Cassie Boyle on the stag, Marissa Schuur splayed and dripping, Dr. Sutcliffe's bloody rictus, the charred and shrunken thing that was once Georgia Madchen, Abigail in hunting gear with an arm slung around her father, the fishing lures in extreme close-up so that the human hair, tissue, and teeth they're made from can be seen to best effect. A mosaic of his nightmares to hang above his pillow. It looks rather like a shrine.

This may not be the most effective way of convincing the world that he's sane.

Dr. Chilton, for obvious reasons, chooses to hold their next session in Will's cell instead of in the Coffee Room. He spends a full minute inspecting the wall of photographs, his hands clasped behind his back and his pointed tongue between his teeth.

"Well," he concludes, "this *is* alarming."

Will doesn't respond. He is skimming a paragraph about horse breeders, his glasses tipped halfway down his nose. The glasses are another freshly granted privilege, and Will is grateful for the extra shielding they provide between himself and Chilton. The bars just aren't enough, not when the hospital director is almost humming with glee.

"Tell me, Mr. Graham, why have you hung these pictures on your wall?"

"There wasn't room on the desk."

It's a lie, but a well-founded one. Will's desk is looking mighty overrun.

Chilton casts a sidelong look at it. "Yes, you have been busy. Agent Crawford cannot manage without you, it seems."

"However much you'd like him to."

Chilton raises both eyebrows. "I cannot say I know what you're talking about."

Will throws down his book. "Victor Hodge could have killed again while your phone was off the hook, Doctor. You really want another woman's death on your conscience?"

"I beg your pardon?" Chilton splutters. "I have done *nothing* but cooperate with Agent Crawford's demands. However, my first priority as director of this hospital is to attend to its maintenance and to the welfare of my patients. There's only so much I can do to facilitate your little side job, Mr. Graham. I'm not your receptionist; I am your psychiatrist, and it falls on me to ensure that… *unscrupulous* third parties aren't exploiting you."

"Jack isn't exploiting me."

"You are imprisoned for murder, recovering from encephalitis, suffering from probable mental illness, and Agent Crawford has manipulated you into continuing to solve his cases for him. If that's not exploitation, I don't know what is."

Will recognizes the words, even if they're emitting from a mouthpiece. He leans back in his chair and asks:

"Been having a lot of dinners with Dr. Lecter lately?"

Chilton looks taken aback. "I don't see what that has to do with anything."

"Right," says Will, rubbing at his eyebrow.

Chilton doesn't like this line of questioning, so he readies his own. "Let's return to this collage you've so lovingly constructed. These particular pictures are important to you. Do

you wish to discuss them?"

"No," says Will. "But you do."

"You've put your handiwork on display, Mr. Graham. Either you're very proud of it—"

Will gives an angry snort.

"—or maybe you're feeling *guilty*."

"It isn't my handiwork," Will mutters. "It's my investigation."

A poisonous little smile from Chilton. "Yes… your 'investigation' of Dr. Lecter, how could I forget. I'm curious as to how that is progressing."

Will grinds his teeth, says nothing.

"What's the matter, Mr. Graham? I thought you'd be eager to share your findings. Unless… there aren't any?"

Will says nothing.

"You can at least discuss your methods with me. You are constructing a profile, is that right? These photographs, you're studying them in the hopes of understanding the mind of the man who committed these crimes."

Will says nothing.

"What do these photographs tell you about him? What do the five murders have in common? Besides, ah, *you*."

Will says nothing. He can feel the muscles in his jaw twitching.

"Why don't I do your work for you, then." Chilton taps his pen against his notes. "Four of the five victims were young women—*pretty* young women—so in all probability sexual hostility had a role in their deaths. I'd hazard that the killer is uncomfortable with members of the opposite sex, starting with his own mother, with whom he had a strained-to-nonexistent relationship. He is sexually repressed, painfully shy, possibly impotent. His only male victim was a doctor. Our murderer has trouble trusting medical professionals"—he smirks—"and it's fair to say he harbors resentment towards authority in general."

He is watching Will closely, waiting for him to explode.

And Will does, in fact, explode—into laughter, wild wheezing laughter that eventually makes his eyes water.

"I take it you disagree," Chilton says, acidly.

"Yes," Will says between gulping breaths of air, "I disagree."

“Why don’t you tell me why?”

Chilton may be incompetent, but he’s very effective when it comes to getting Will so riled up he can’t keep himself from talking.

“This isn’t the return of the repressed, Doctor. This killer is in complete control of himself and everything else. He stage-manages his murders. They are elaborate. Precise. There’s a high degree of premeditation, but at the same time, he can improvise when necessary. That flexibility comes from only the most profound confidence. He doesn’t have a problem with authority. He *is* authority.”

Chilton’s beady eyes slip and slide over Will’s face. He’s trying to catch up. “So what you’re saying is, these were not crimes of passion.”

“But they were.” A tremble in Will’s voice. He can’t resist the urge to turn, to look at the photographs himself. “A surfeit of passion, it’s just not a passion you or I would understand.”

“You seem like you do understand it, though,” Chilton says. There is a sly note of insinuation in his voice, but Will doesn’t notice. He is too absorbed in the photographs.

“Mmm,” he says. The pendulum inside him wants to swing. He says: “Not well enough.”

“Then how do you understand him better? You think his thoughts? Relive his crimes, until you reach the point where his passions become your passions?”

“Yes.”

“You reintegrate your personality with his.”

And Will suddenly remembers who he’s talking to. He twists back around and sees the gleam in Chilton’s eye: c*aught you*.

“Dr. Chilton,” Will says, as firmly as he can. “I am not profiling *myself*.”

“Not the person you think of as yourself, no. But this,”—Chilton indicates the wall of photos—“represents a part of you, Will Graham. A part of you so twisted, so repellant to your own values and, ah, better nature, that you’ve made yourself forget him. But you want to remember him, I think. Deep down, you want to. These pictures, they might play a small part in stimulating your memory. However, I could do so much more.”

Will smiles slowly, despite the warning bells, because of the warning bells.

“You’re going to remind me of who I am, same way you reminded Dr. Gideon?”

Chilton smiles back. “Not precisely the same way, no.”

“I think I’ll pass,” Will says. He returns to his reading and ignores Chilton’s questions for the rest of the session.

Of course Dr. Chilton would work himself into a lather over the photos, but the fact of the matter is, they aren't meant for him. The photos aren't up for Will's benefit, either. He doesn't need the reminder. No matter what, he'll see these images projected ceaselessly against the dark backing of his closed lids.

He has hung these photos up in order for them to be viewed by one person, and one person only.

When Hannibal next visits, there is a fractional hesitation in his step as he first glimpses the wall above Will's bed. He recovers instantly, of course, but Will still wants to punch the air over this little victory.

"Hello, Will," Hannibal says, conversational as always.

"Hello, Dr. Lecter. You've seen my evidence wall?"

Hannibal's eyes have yet to leave it. "Rather hard to miss."

"What's the matter? Does it bother you?"

"I think the more salient question would be why it doesn't bother you." Hannibal is still staring at the photos, his expression concealed by iron shutters. "It's not like you to treat these images lightly, to live so comfortably beside the terrible memories they evoke."

Will turns around, looks at the wall of photos. "I assure you, I am treating them with the respect and dedication they deserve. Would you like to talk about my investigation?"

"I'd rather talk about your *hands*, Will."

He whips around. Hannibal is no longer looking at the evidence wall. He's staring pointedly at Will's bitten fingernails. Without thinking, Will hides them underneath the desk, and Hannibal's lips contort in an unmistakable smirk.

"Look what you've done to yourself," he says. "You never told me you suffered from onychophagia. Or is this bad habit brand new?"

"I've got it under control," Will mutters.

"You've bitten past the quick. You should be more careful, you could give yourself an infection."

"I'm touched by your concern."

Hannibal's eyebrows draw up ever so slightly. "I still consider myself your friend, Will, even if you don't return the sentiment. Of course I'm concerned about you." He settles himself in his chair and peers at Will with a keen, clinical expression. "Sudden difficulties with impulse control are often associated with stress. Would you say you're feeling stressed?"

Will laughs morbidly to himself. "That a trick question?"

Hannibal makes a note in his little black book. “Perhaps your return to investigative work is causing you some strain. You have to be honest with Jack about your limits. You saw what happened when you deceived him.”

“I’m not the one deceiving him,” Will says. “I’ve got a handle on my work. Actually, I’m handling it *well*.”

“Then perhaps the stress that has driven you to indulge in compulsive behavior hails from a different quarter. Tell me, how are things between you and Alana Bloom?”

Will’s blood pressure spikes. “Fine.”

Hannibal waits for him to say more. Will bites his tongue.

“You do not wish to discuss Alana?”

“There’s nothing to discuss.”

“She’s very worried about you. Your behavior during her last visit was dist—”

“*I said there’s nothing to discuss*.”

“As you wish,” says Hannibal. And he *smiles*. “Then what shall we discuss?”

Will grabs a very large binder off his desk. “Let’s discuss Garret Jacob Hobbs.”

“By all means.” Hannibal folds his hands in his lap.

Will pages through the binder, his eyes roaming over call logs, interview transcripts, a Russian novel’s worth of names and incident. “You told Jack that I called Hobbs to tip him off that we were coming for him.”

Hannibal blinks unrepentantly. “I told Jack only what I remembered. You doubled back to the office while the administrative assistant and I were loading the car.”

“Funny,” says Will. “I don’t remember doing that. Does she remember me doing that?”

“The day in question was more than six months ago. Her recollection has faded, as all recollections inevitably do. Memory is a capricious instrument, Will. You know that better than most.”

“Ok,” says Will. “Tell me this. Why would I bother warning Garret Jacob Hobbs, if I was just going to shoot him dead twenty minutes later?”

Hannibal’s answer is immediate. “You weren’t interested in a scenario in which Garret Jacob Hobbs came quietly and cooperated with your investigation. You wanted mayhem and bloodshed. Your phone call caused Hobbs to panic and attack his family. The perfect excuse to shoot him.”

Will weighs this in his mind from Hannibal's perspective and declares it truth. "You wanted me to shoot him," he says. "You were hoping I would have the chance. That was part of your plan for me. Better Living Through Murder."

This earns him a ghost of a smile from Hannibal. "You think I made you shoot Hobbs?"

Will shakes his head. " 'Made' is a strong word. You don't make people do things, not if you can help it. There's no fun in it if you have to force them. What you like to do is make suggestions. You clear the floor, you choose the music, and then you wait for someone to dance."

Hannibal's eyes flash. "Are you dancing now, Will?"

Will's lips curl. "You sabotaged me. You sabotaged my investigation. And I bet you've done it since. Fed me misinformation. Steered me in the wrong direction. You were subtle, you made it as unnoticeable as you could. And any time I did catch you at it, you tried to make me think I was crazy."

"When have I ever led you astray?"

Will flips to the middle of his binder. "Tobias Budge," he says.

"Tobias Budge?" Hannibal repeats, skeptically. "He attacked me."

"Yes, and your patient, Franklyn Froidevaux. I'm adding them both to the list."

"The list?"

"Of your known victims."

Hannibal—very minutely and somehow *politely*—rolls his eyes. "So now according to you, I killed Franklyn?"

Will, too, rolls his eyes—not so politely though. "I think it's likely you had a hand in it, yeah."

"You know I killed Tobias in self-defense."

Will snorts.

Hannibal tilts his head. "Why would I murder either of them?"

"Budge knew what you were. He was…courting you. I walked in on your dinner date, remember? I guess you didn't like what he was offering, huh? He wasn't up to your high standards, so he had to go. Franklyn Froidevaux—either he was in on it with Budge, or he was just in the wrong place at the wrong time."

Hannibal shakes his head, his lips tilting downward. Does he think Will is too close, or not close enough? He says:

“Will, this is more than just a jump you can’t explain. This is a flight of fancy. There is nothing in that evidence binder to justify your claims. Nary a scrap of proof.”

Will just shrugs. “If I find enough people who’ve conveniently dropped dead while in your company, that’ll constitute enough for a warrant.”

“So that is your plan.” Hannibal sounds almost disappointed. “Compile a list of evidence, no matter how circumstantial, and turn it over to Jack?”

“In a nutshell.” Will slams the binder shut.

“How do you think Jack will react when presented with such a thing?”

“Jack’ll look at the evidence. He’ll take me seriously.”

“You are grabbing at straws, Will. Jack will know.”

Hannibal says this gently, with a kind of rueful compassion that raises the hair on Will’s arms. He is momentarily unnerved. This isn’t Hannibal mocking him, or gloating. This is Hannibal in the guise of Hannibal-of-old, Will’s friend the good doctor, who always knew what was best for Will and told him so. Will is so obsessed with the real Hannibal Lecter that he has forgotten his previous incarnation, the Hannibal whom Will actually liked, the Hannibal he trusted. He realizes with a dizzy feeling akin to vertigo that he has missed this Hannibal, that he is still mourning the loss of this man, even though he never existed in the first place.

But there he is, resurrected, his sad eyes gleaming at Will through the bars. The gall of it. He’s trying to discourage Will from investigating him—for Will’s own good. It is *infuriating*.

Will leans forward, his eyes burning with hatred. “You’ve killed others, God knows how many. I’m going to find them, Dr. Lecter. You’re not as great a chameleon as you think you are. You have style, a certain *whimsy*. You can’t help yourself. It’s distinct, identifiable. If I go back far enough, I’ll find the one time you weren’t quite as careful as you should have been. I’ll spot your mistake—even *you* must have made at least one. No matter how negligible, no matter how well disguised, I’ll find it and I will catch you. It’s only a matter of time, and time is the one thing I’ve got plenty of in here.”

Hannibal leans forward, matching Will. He actually wraps his large hands around the bars. “This is desperate thinking, Will. Desperate coping. You think you’ve found your footholds, but in reality you are slipping, you are letting yourself fall further down the rabbit hole.”

Will crosses his arms in front of him, even though he knows he’s giving Hannibal a prime view of his fingernails.

“Dr. Lecter, I am not the one here who’s *desperate*.”

His excitement is such that he gets a little breathless as he goes through his case point by point. Alana has drawn up a timeline of the encephalitis's progression: November—headaches; December—sleepwalking, mild hallucinations; January—auditory hallucinations; etc. Next to each entry, Will deals out crime scene photographs like playing cards. A royal flush of illness and a full house of death.

Nigella Karim, his lawyer—a powerhouse in the field of mental health law, according to Alana—listens carefully as Will takes her through each murder. Karim is impeccably professional, her hair shining and curled like a newscaster's, her face betraying not a whit of emotion.

Will tells her how the wounds on Cassie Boyle and Marissa Schuur would have required great physical strength and coordination, not to mention an encyclopedic knowledge of anatomy. He spends a full minute describing the immaculate precision of the cuts that removed Cassie Boyle's lungs and severed Donald Sutcliffe's jaw. As he flips through his binder, his handcuffs clink on the table, a metronome to keep the pace. He describes each murder with a level of detail that is bordering on loving, paying particular attention to preparation and cleanup. He explains how the murderer stored and planted forensic evidence while being careful not to leave behind any of his own. He must have travelled with a comprehensive toolkit, but even then, he enjoyed incorporating whatever was on hand as long as he could get away with it clean. He cut Sutcliffe's throat with the neurologist's own scissors. The stag head he found in a bar three miles away from the field where they discovered Cassie Boyle; he stole it at an hour when he was certain he wouldn't be spotted, which meant he had to have canvassed the area beforehand. Will surmises that he always conducted reconnaissance for his murders in the open; it explains the way he avoided security cameras at every turn. There were no less than four of them in the corridor outside Georgia Madchen's hospital room, and almost miraculously they captured nothing suspicious the day of her death. Abigail's murderer's preparation was so exact and all encompassing that he managed to completely dispose of her body, everything except her ear. He made her vanish off the face of the earth. Will turned himself over to the FBI less than twenty-four hours after her death—when would he have found the time to so thoroughly erase her entire existence?

As he speaks, his control slips away until both his voice and his hands are shaking. He can't help it. Hannibal's work fills him with a kind of dark awe.

He finishes his presentation and comes back to himself. The first thing he notices is Alana, staring down into her lap as if she can't bear to look at him. But Karim is calm and steady, and has maintained eye contact with him throughout his argument.

"Ok," she says, tapping her manicured fingers on the table. "I believe I follow you. But tell me in your own words, Will, what exactly I'm meant to glean from all of this?"

Will senses trouble. He looks down at the metal table, at his stacks of notes and photos. Suddenly it all looks like nothing but a frantic mess. Nevertheless he keeps his voice even as he says:

"I'm proving to you that the person who committed these murders was awake and aware of everything: his surroundings, his victims, his own strength. He premeditates. He does his research. He cleans up after himself. There's no panic here, no confusion, no hesitation. None

of this was the work of someone in a dissociative state, Mrs. Karim. It's just not possible. The evidence proves it's not possible."

Karim says nothing. Alana looks up, catches her eye, and the two of them share a long, significant look. Then Karim turns back to Will.

"And what are you suggesting I do with this evidence?"

Will can't prevent a hint of causticness from creeping into his voice. "Um," he says, "use it to prove I didn't do this?"

Karim leans forward, all sharpened consonants and professional concern. "Listen to me, Will. All you've proven is that you were in your right mind when you committed these murders. Which is very bad for you. As bad as it gets. If we,"—she has to hold up a hand to stop Will from interrupting—"if we submit a not guilty plea and I use this"—she indicates the binder —"as your defense, you're risking a worst case scenario of lethal injection. Best case scenario is you receive a life sentence in a maximum-security prison with no chance of parole."

"If you submit a not guilty plea," Will says, his voice rising, "best case scenario is *you prove I'm innocent.*"

The only response he receives is silence. Alana pinches the bridge of her nose.

Karim's voice is velvety, but not soothing. "No one likes an insanity plea. I understand why you want to find a way around it. But Will, believe me, an insanity plea is your best, your *only* option here. You have a forensic psychiatrist at the top of her field who firmly believes that you meet the requirements for an insanity defense. That's a big deal, Will. Insanity defenses get laughed out of court all the time these days."

She gives an encouraging nod to Alana, clearly eager for the other woman to chip in with her support.

Alana finally looks up from her lap. "Will," she says, "I know how hard this is for you to hear. But you have to let your counsel decide what's best. You can't argue this as if it's a case you're trying to solve. You don't have the perspective here to do that."

"That's not what I'm doing," Will says. "I just want my case tried based solely on the available evidence, that's all. Why is that so unreasonable?"

"Because no jury will see the evidence the way you do," Karim says. "They'll convict you, Will. You'll go to prison."

"So better I claim to be crazy so they'll keep me here instead?" Will shakes his head. "The Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane *is* prison. Alana, you know I don't want to be here any more."

"I know," Alana says. "But if a jury finds you not guilty by reason of insanity, you won't be here forever. If you cooperate with treatment and make good progress, then in a few years we

can get you transferred to a minimum-security hospital."

"That's the best outcome we can hope for," Karim says, nodding.

"The best outcome," Will repeats. He rubs his face. "Wow."

Karim clears her throat. "This hospital is better for you than any prison. After all, you're receiving treatment here. That's something."

"I don't need treatment," Will says, into the palms spread over his face. "I'm not sick."

Karim nods. She expected him to make this argument. "But you were sick, you can't deny that. You had an extremely unusual illness, an illness that the medical community is still in the process of understanding, and underlying that, you have a personality disorder that is even more unusual. These two rare conditions interacted in a truly unprecedented way, and five people died because of it. It's a fluke of bad luck and brain chemistry. This isn't your fault, Will; you shouldn't be punished as if it were. But if I'd done what you've done, I'd want treatment. I'd need treatment. I wouldn't be able to live with myself otherwise."

Will stares at her through the splayed fingers he still has over his face. He knows this is exactly what she plans to say when she defends him in court. He can't bear it.

"I can't do this," he whispers.

Karim frowns, not understanding what he means. But Alana gets it. She says:

"Will, *no*."

He takes down his hands. "I'm not going to tell everyone I'm insane when I'm not. Mrs. Karim, you can go now."

Up go Karim's heavily plucked eyebrows. "Excuse me?"

"I don't want you as my lawyer."

"Will," Alana says again. And then to Karim: "He doesn't mean that."

But Karim is on her feet, one finger stabbing at the table. "Mr. Graham, any defense attorney worth her salt is going to tell you the same thing I have. Do you *want* to be executed?"

"I want the truth," Will says, to his handcuffs. "I'm sorry for wasting your time."

Karim is in a huff. She grabs her briefcase, motions to the guards, and strides from the Coffee Room, her stilettos clacking on the marble floor of the corridor.

Will looks up at Alana. In slow motion, he watches her tamping down on her frustration, summoning her considerable willpower, cloaking all of it under the guise of apologetic professionalism, and readying herself for battle. This display renders Will speechless; he has just seen Alana at her absolute best. She splays her hands on the table and pushes herself upright. She doesn't look at Will as she hurries out of the room, pursuing Karim down the

hallway. Will can hear the burr of urgent voices filtering through the gap beneath the door, but he can't discern the words.

He stares a black hole into his binder and waits.

Alana re-enters the room slowly, wearily, all that fighter's energy expended. Karim isn't with her. "Can you shut the door, please?" she asks the guards, and they comply.

She drops into the chair across from Will.

"Nigella has agreed to come back next week. You're lucky. You didn't faze her. She's had a lot of experience with uncooperative clients."

"I don't want her," Will says.

"But you need her," Alana says. "I've worked with Nigella before. She has a great record, she will go to bat for you. Please, just trust me, Will."

Will looks into her large eyes, the intensity of her expression. He sees firelight ripple across her face—he shudders. "How can I trust you?" he whispers. "When you don't trust me?"

Alana's chin trembles. "*Will*."

"You think I'm crazy." He feels salt burning at his eyes.

"I think you've been ill, really ill, and that you're still recovering."

He shakes his head. "You think I belong in this place."

Now her eyes are wet, too. "I *don't*."

"You really think I killed them? You think I killed Abigail? Do you think that I'm—I'm capable of murdering five people? *Five* people."

She is struggling not to cry in earnest. "The evidence—"

"*I don't care about the evidence*!" Will slams the heavy handcuffs on the table and the room rings with it. The guards both take a step forward. "I want to know what you feel—what you really feel—about me."

"But you know how I feel," she says, as a tear falls. "I want to believe you. God, I want to."

"Then believe me," he says. A crack in his voice. "Just believe me. Please, Alana."

She swipes her eyes. She stands up. "I don't understand," she says. She turns around, walks to the corner of the room, and when she next speaks, she sounds hoarse with fury. "I don't understand why you have to make it so hard for me to save you."

His mouth drops open. "That's not what I'm doing."

She is laughing with rage. “It is. You’re doing everything you can to drive me away. And not just me; you keep alienating anyone who tries to help you. Do you know how many people I’ve had to apologize to on your behalf?”

He shrinks away from the intensity of her anger. “Alana, you don’t have to do that.”

“But I want to!” Alana says, her hands gathering into fists. “I want to! Because you deserve that much! You deserve more. But you keep sabotaging me. Every time I try to do something for you, you throw it in my face. I got you that file. You asked me for it, and against my better judgment I got it for you, and now look what you’re doing with it. You are destroying your own defense.”

He wants to stand up, to follow her into that corner and put his hand on her trembling shoulder. But he is chained to the table. “Alana—” he says.

“I can’t talk to you right now.” She spins around to face him and wipes her nose, like a child. “I’m angry and I’m frustrated and I’m saying a lot of things I don’t mean. I’m sorry. It’s your illness I’m angry with. It’s this situation, and this place. It’s not you, do you understand? None of this is meant for you. So don’t take it personally, please. Just… don’t take me personally.”

And before he can stop her, before he can say anything, she has stormed from the room, taking with her the Class 3 hurricane that is her emotional state. Will knows how she’s feeling. The rage, the heartache, the frustration so acute she can barely breathe. But these emotions aren’t what will haunt him tonight—what concerns him now is that beneath the rage, beneath the pain and all the rest, Alana feels guilty. And what—oh God what—does she have to feel guilty for?

Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

Hannibal gives Will a birthday present.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It takes him ten days to catch the taxidermist. Three days to identify the serial child-poisoner Jack brings him next. Thirty-five hours (straight; he doesn't sleep) to find the rock quarry where a geologist has been burying his interns alive. The geologist is claustrophobic, and for thirty-five hours so is Will; he wrestles with the conviction that the bars of his cell are boring in on him. But that doesn't stop him. It only goads him on.

He cracks the case fast enough for Jack to recover two of the victims before they suffocate. Beverly, phone pressed hard against her ear, relays the good news to Will, Price, and Zeller, the four of them convened in the ad hoc war room that is the corridor adjacent to Will's cell. The team's relief is palpable, bordering on hysterical. Price, particularly giddy, goes down the line issuing high-fives. After the tiniest hesitation, he high-fives Will through the bars—and oh, how it makes Beverly grin like a fiend. For once even Zeller looks like he doesn't need a gun to his head to make him set foot in the Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane. The whole team has been wooed back by Will's success rate, and their working dynamic has settled into the smooth motion of old. It's true that sometimes Price gets skittish when the inmates are in a howling mood, and Zeller has as little to do with Will as he possibly can, but for the most part the schism is healed. If it weren't for the jumpsuit and him being on the wrong side of the bars, Will could be mistaken for just another member of the team.

Price and Zeller wrap up their gear. They say they're needed back in Quantico early the next morning and want a little shut-eye, but Will knows they're heading to the nearest bar for a celebratory beer. He expects Beverly to join them, but instead she turns to him and says, "You know what I could really go for right now? Some moo shu pork."

Twenty minutes later, she's back in the corridor with a plastic bag full of Chinese takeout.

"The delivery guy was *freaked*," she says. "Totally white-faced."

Barney is right behind her. “We’ve got a card table in the staff room,” he says. “Why don’t I get it for you?”

“Floor’s fine.” And Beverly drops cross-legged on to it. “Hey Barney, you want some chicken broccoli? I got extra.”

“Thanks, but I shouldn’t. I’m on the clock.”

Beverly rolls her eyes dramatically. “Come on. Take an egg roll, at least.”

Barney looks torn.

Will settles on the floor across from Beverly, who pushes a carton right up next to the bars for him. “Have something to eat, Barney,” he says. “You’re already bending protocol by letting me have these.” He scissors his chopsticks.

Barney helps himself to the egg rolls. Meanwhile Beverly laughs at Will. “What’re you going to do with those, take out someone’s eye?”

“I wasn’t planning on it,” Will says, “but I may accidentally give myself a splinter.”

He has been smiling so much the last half hour that his face is beginning to hurt. He can’t remember the last time he felt this normal. Long before his incarceration, it would have to be.

Barney returns to duty, but Beverly and Will stay where they are, on the floor, their heads tilted together as they pass the takeout cartons back and forth through the bars.

“Thank you,” Will says, his mouth full of noodles.

“Any time,” says Beverly. “You name the cuisine, I’ll deliver. Beats the gruel they dish out here, I bet.”

“It does, but that’s not what I meant. Thank you for making me feel, uh… ordinary, I guess, is the word I’m looking for.”

“I make you feel ordinary?” She sniffs. “What a compliment.”

“I meant it as one.”

“I know you did.”

She grins. He grins back.

“You don’t have to thank me for treating you like a co-worker,” she says. “You *are* my co-worker. One who is freaking amazing at his job, by the way. Seriously, you’ve been on fire these last few weeks. If I’d done what you’d just did, they’d give me a commendation—maybe even a bonus.”

Will shrugs. “These days I find it very easy to focus. I don’t exactly have a lot of other things to spend my time on.”

Beverly motions behind him with her chopsticks. “You have that. Whatever that is. What is that?”

Will realizes she means his evidence wall and it becomes suddenly harder for him to swallow. Up until now the FBI agents have carefully ignored his wall of photographs—Jack’s eyes skate over Will’s cell as if it isn’t there—but Beverly has never been one for tactful avoidance.

“I’m not supposed to talk to you about it,” he says quietly, his eyes on his dinner.

“Says who?”

“Says Jack.”

Beverly presses her lips together. “Got it.” But her eyes remain focused over Will’s shoulder. “You know, I had one of those, too. In high school. Except mine was all photos of Kurt Cobain. I’d cut up every music magazine I could find. At night I’d lie in bed and look at it; I liked pretending he was watching me as I fell asleep.”

“Creepy,” Will says. “Now, if it was Jim Morrison, that I could understand.”

She lets out a little raspberry of surprised laughter, and he chuckles, too. He is surprised to find he isn’t offended that she has likened his evidence wall to a Tiger Beat collage. Instead he feels a twisted sense of relief, poking fun at his only lifeline.

Beverly waves her chopsticks as if to dispel her laughter, her expression growing suddenly thoughtful. “Ok, but here’s the thing. If you’re lying in bed, that wall’s out of view, you can’t see it. And during the day, you’re mostly sitting at the desk or seeing visitors—you’re not staring at those photos.”

Will hears himself being profiled and doesn’t like it. “You going to eat that pork?” he asks, his voice pitched higher than normal.

But Beverly won’t be deflected. “Seriously, Will. The Wall of Crazy; you didn’t put it up for you, did you? You put it up for us.”

He pretends to be hunting for a particular piece of shredded pork. “Why would I do that?”

“Because you know what people see when they look at you. You know they see—well, *that*. Guess this is your way of calling them out on it, huh?”

Will chews slowly to put off having to answer her. “Do you see me differently?”

“Now that you mention it, I do. I see the jerk who just ate all my moo shu.” And she grins, devilishly. “Doing something special for your birthday?”

He blinks, whiplashed by the change in subject. “My—what?”

“The thirteenth, right? It’s next week.”

“Oh.” He rubs his face. “I didn’t know. You lose track of time in here.”

“I bet. So what’ll you do?”

“Uh…same old, same old, I guess. Wake up. Read something. Get psychoanalyzed against my will. Count the spiderwebbing cracks in the plaster.”

Beverly’s forehead creases. “That’s terrible. We can’t let you do that.”

“I don’t have much choice, Bev.”

“What would you do,” she asks, settling her shoulders back, “if you could do anything? What’s your perfect birthday?”

I would catch Hannibal Lecter, Will thinks. *I’d see the monster underneath the mask. I’d watch him rot away in this same cell I’m sitting in now.*

“What’s yours?” he asks.

“That’s easy.” Beverly pumps one fist. “Vegas, baby!”

He raises his eyebrows.

“What?” she crows defensively. “I love Vegas. It’s trashy, the food’s fabulous, and I always clean up at the tables. I don’t like to brag, but I’m kind of a genius at poker. I do a game every week and win all my friends’ money. They hate me.” She smiles at the fond memories, then shoots him a look. “You seem like you’d be good at poker.”

He thinks about it. “I’m ok. I know when people are bluffing, but I’ve been told I have a pathetic poker face. More tells than you can count.”

Beverly smirks. “I have to see that. We’ll play some time. But you’ve dodged me. Perfect birthday! Come on, you must have one.”

“I…” He honestly doesn’t know how to answer. “I guess I’d… I’d… go… home.” He stops, unable to think of anything to add.

The moment is awkward, and it only gets more awkward when Beverly’s eyes turn bright. “Yeah…” she says, thick-voiced. “Yeah, I guess that’s what you’d do.”

They lift the mood by opening their fortune cookies. Beverly’s says: “You have an adventurous spirit.” Will’s: “Others enjoy your company,” which for some reason makes them both collapse with laughter. It has been a long day.

Beverly stops by for a visit on his birthday even though they aren’t currently working a case. She brings him a MP3 player loaded with the full discography for The Doors and a pack of

Playboy Playmate branded playing cards. Will acts appropriately mortified by the cards, but he is happy; he understands that what Bev has really given him is friendship.

Beverly isn't the only person who has thought to get him a birthday present. A full battalion of guards escorts Will to the Coffee Room, and he is certain he's in for some particularly sadistic therapy courtesy of Dr. Chilton.

But Barney tells him, "Alana Bloom will be here in a minute," before stepping out of the room. Will lets out a sigh, but not one of relief. If his visitor is Alana, then she has probably brought Nigella Karim along with her, primed to deliver another insufferable lecture on the benefits of Will standing up in court and announcing his insanity to the world.

A curious series of noises in the hallway. A metallic clatter, a scuffling, and a rhythmic click. Perhaps another inmate being escorted to therapy.

Alana enters the room a moment later, but she doesn't have Nigella Karim in tow. She has Winston.

"Happy birthday," she says.

Without meaning to, Will lets out a little noise. Winston sees Will and his excited panting fills the room. Alana has him on a short leash and he keeps trying to pull away, to bound towards Will.

"They won't let me take him off the leash," Alana says, apologetically.

Will isn't cuffed to the table today, only to the leather belt at his waist, so he stands up—which makes the guards shock to attention—and shambles over to his visitors. He kneels on the floor and Winston goes straight for his face, sniffing and licking. The dog is full of anxious energy, the product of his being in a strange place on a short leash, but Winston knows Will. Finally, something familiar.

"Hey, boy," he says. "Hey, hey, it's me. Look at you. It's good to see you." He blinks hard, composing himself before making eye contact with Alana. "He's looking good."

"He's missed you," Alana says. She is smiling very wide, very tremulous.

"I've missed you, too," Will whispers to Winston. "You and your brothers and sisters." He runs his hands through Winston's fur, cradles his expressive face. The handcuffs make it awkward to really pet him. Winston sniffs suspiciously at the chains.

"Yeah," Will says, "I'm on a leash, too."

Alana kneels down to join them and drags her knuckles over Winston's back. For a minute they sit in silence, petting him together.

"How did you get Chilton to agree to this?" Will asks, wonder in his voice.

"It took some work," Alana says. "In the end I had to promise I'd introduce him to the editor of the Journal of Psychiatric Medicine. He's interested in publishing."

“Ugh,” says Will. “The psychiatric field probably won’t thank you for that, but I do. Can’t tell you what this means, you bringing him.”

“You don’t have to tell me,” she says, quietly. “I know.”

They look at each other for a long time, Winston shifting between them, impatient for more attention. They haven’t had a real conversation since their argument about Will’s sanity, or lack thereof, and the bad blood stands between them with almost the same corporeality as the dog. Alana’s guilt casts its shadow over her open face. Will still has his suspicions about the origins of said guilt; he tries not to think about it, he tries very hard, but he can’t stop himself. It’s there, plainly, for him to see. Alana has done something behind his back, and she is ashamed of it, even as she refuses to regret it. Maybe she thinks it won’t happen again. But Will knows it will. He would warn her, if she would listen. But she won’t listen, so he doesn’t warn her. Instead he salts the wound.

He reaches out—slowly, so as not to panic the guards—mindful not to let the handcuffs make a sound in the futile hope that she’ll forget they’re there. He can’t bring himself to make contact with her bare skin. Vividly he remembers how it felt to touch her, to kiss her, this memory melding seamlessly into his imaginings of Hannibal seducing her, and these sensations suddenly become so real for Will, so present and immediate, that he is morbidly afraid of what might happen if he were to touch her now. Instead he lays one finger on the silver starfish pendant she always wears. Through it he can feel her breathing, the play of emotions underneath her skin.

He stays that way, for how long he couldn’t say. The guards are staring. Winston brushes his nose against the part of Will’s wrist not covered by the handcuffs.

Then Alana touches him. She takes his hand in both of hers, removing his finger from her necklace, and very gently, as if nervous she might break him, she brings his hand up and nestles it against the cool skin of her chin. He expects her to kiss it, but she doesn’t. She just keeps it safe there for a little while.

Afterwards, as he lies in bed, he finds he doesn’t know how to interpret this gesture of Alana’s. Was she forgiving him? Was he forgiving her? The memory of it makes him burn with a guilt of his own.

All in all, it isn’t the worst birthday of his life, which considering his circumstances is really saying something.

What he doesn’t know then is that he still has one more birthday present yet to be delivered. He won’t get it for another two days. First they have to find the body.

Will is at his desk, reading through the autopsy report for Donald Sutcliffe, when he becomes aware of a large group of people fast approaching his cell. Purposeful footsteps, he has learned, are usually the heralds of a new case.

He stands up, ready for them. There is Jack, at the head of the group. Signs of sleeplessness on Jack's grim face. Beverly, Price, and Zeller struggle to match his quick stride.

"What is it?" Will asks, struck by the dourness of Jack's expression.

"Guess who just came up for air?" Beverly says.

Jack silences her with a hand in her face. "We don't know it's him. Let Will see the file first."

And Will recognizes this version of Jack: the rough edges, the gravity, his woundedness. "It's the Ripper, isn't it?" he asks, quietly.

"That's what I want you to tell me." And Jack spins around to face his team. "Where's the file?"

"I have it," says Hannibal.

And indeed he does. He is standing behind the others, nothing but a shadow, seemingly absorbed in the folder spread open in his hands. He makes no move to hand the file over to Jack.

Will reacts before he can think. "*What's he doing here*?"

The BAU team jump a little. They turn to stare at him.

Jack's eyes narrow. "Dr. Lecter is here at my invitation."

Will swallows thickly, dips his chin. "Whyyyy?"

"We've had just about every other forensic psychiatrist on the East Coast take a crack at this," Jack says, watching Will closely, "so now it's Dr. Lecter's turn."

"Fresh meat for the Chesapeake Ripper," Hannibal says, in a voice washed clean of color.

Will can't speak. He stares from Hannibal—who is still reading the file, apparently unconcerned with what's going on with Will—to Jack, who is watching Will with such force that he is all but dissecting him with his eyes. This is a test, an evaluation of his mettle. Jack's test? Hannibal's? Doesn't matter. Will needs to stay calm either way.

"I don't know if I can work with him," he says quietly to Jack, in what he considers to be a reasonable tone of voice.

Jack raises his eyebrows.

"And why is that?" Hannibal asks, looking up from his reading with an expression of polite surprise. *Polite surprise!*

Will grits out through his teeth, "Because you're my psychiatrist."

“Hannibal has helped you with cases before,” Jack says. “He tagged along on Silvestri’s arrest, when we still thought he was the Ripper.”

Will registers Jack’s switch from Hannibal’s last name to his first, and feels a weight of dread settling in on him.

“I tried to shoot him, Jack,” he whispers, a last ditch attempt.

“I’d think that would make it harder for Hannibal to work with you, not the other way around. Now, I’ve already talked to Hannibal about this, and he doesn’t see it as a problem. I don’t see it as a problem. Do you see a problem, Will?”

Will can’t speak. His mouth flaps open and closed like a fish.

“*I said, have we got a problem*?”

Jack’s threat is plain. They are all watching him. He can feel the battering ram of their collective stares.

“No,” Will says, in a wispy voice, grinning for absolutely no reason at all. He clears his throat and says more emphatically: “No problem.”

“Are you sure?” Jack asks.

“Just give me the file,” snaps Will.

Jack reaches around to take the file from Hannibal, but Hannibal pretends not to see him. Instead he glides forward, Zeller and Price inching out of his way as Hannibal steps into the light. There is a thrumming, thrumming in Will’s ears. He sees the smile on Hannibal’s face, so miniscule, infinitely sly. The FBI agents can’t see it; they have no idea what it is that’s standing in their midst.

Hannibal extends one arm through the bars of Will’s cell. He offers Will the file, his forefinger along its spine. Will takes a breath and reaches for it, and as his hand closes over the folder, he feels Hannibal’s finger brush him. Not an accident. A caress. Will jumps like he’s just been administered an electric shock.

The moment passes unnoticed, and then Hannibal is gone from the bars. He steps back to the shadows, deferring his prime place to Jack and the other agents. Will shakes it off. He has no choice but to shake it off, even as he feels a phantom crackle in his skin. He opens the file.

What he sees with his waking eyes is a man, mid-thirties, lying in a corner of a mirrored room. The mirrors on either side of him are broken, cracked from side to side. Dozens of shards of fractured glass have been jabbed in the man’s skin, post-mortem—the corpse bristles with them, like a mockery of a porcupine. There are bloodstains on his abdomen and legs, signs of organs and flesh removed. His throat has been cut and his eyes put out. He’ll never see his own reflection again.

What Will sees with his dreaming eyes is something else. An autostereogram: a nonsense image, patterns of dots, but when viewed with special focus they transform into a three-

dimensional object with mass and meaning. Will saw one in church once, back in Biloxi when he was still taken to church. If you stared at it just right with your eyes a little crossed, the dots and slashes coalesced into the face of Jesus. *Magic*, he'd thought then. And once he'd seen that face, he couldn't unsee it, even if he tried. It was always there, burned across his mind like a scar.

In essence, that is what happens now to Will. He looks at the Chesapeake Ripper's freshest kill and all the confusion in his head, the blinding cloud of snow that is the swirl of things he doesn't know, all of it judders to attention as if suddenly struck by lightning, and he watches, mesmerized, as it molds itself into a solid image, an image of significance—a design.

He sees a face there, but it's not the face of God.

He looks up. The cell has gone very bright. He sways on his feet. He can't see the people on the other side of the bars. They may as well have disappeared. He swivels on the spot and it is as if a floodlight shines on his evidence wall, lighting it up like a Christmas tree. He stares at it, breathes it in. Then he looks back down at the Ripper's latest kill. He knows. *He knows*.

"He's you," he says.

The floodlight spins around and illuminates Hannibal Lecter. Will can see him: him, and no one else. And he'll be damned if Hannibal at this moment hasn't even bothered to put on his mask.

"You're him," Will says, voice shaking.

Jack is saying something, an underwater garble. Unintelligible. Not important now.

"A copycat?" Will asks.

Hannibal gleams at him. He no longer needs to speak in order to be understood.

"Noooo." Will shakes his head, almost smiling. "The real deal."

Jack is still talking, the sounds screened by the clamor of Will's heart.

"I've been so stupid," Will says. "Should've seen it long ago. Why didn't I see? Why didn't I see?"

"WILL!"

The floodlight sparks out. The cell comes back, the corridor beyond it and all the people in it. Jack is right up at the bars, gripping them because he can't grip Will's shoulders. Beverly is staring at Will, her expression pale and arrested. Price and Zeller are nervously averting their gazes. Hannibal has his mask back on.

"Are you with us, Will?" Jack asks, voice raised.

Will is swaying again, but he says, "I'm with you."

“I need to know whether what we’re dealing with here is the Ripper.”

“Yes, what you’re dealing with here is the Ripper. Right here. Here he is.” And Will points at Hannibal.

Jack follows Will’s pointing finger as if he expects someone other than Hannibal to be standing there. His face goes slack, a hope snuffed out. “I don’t understand,” he says, in a dangerous voice.

“Hannibal Lecter is the Chesapeake Ripper,” Will says.

Everyone stares between Will and Hannibal. Price looks like he’s trying to work out the joke. Zeller has his eyebrows raised almost to his hairline. Beverly is just plain frightened. Jack’s eyes have gone opaque as marbles.

Hannibal endures their inspection with a look of blameless chagrin, as if he is unsure how he has gotten himself into this silly situation.

“Ok,” Jack says, gathering himself up. “I need you to take a breath, Will. Clear your head, all right?”

“My head’s fine, Jack,” Will says. “Lecter’s the Ripper. Lecter’s been the Ripper all along. Watching us from afar. Laughing at us. Now he’s come in for a closer look.”

Jack takes a long breath through his nose. Says nothing.

So Hannibal steps in. “Will,” he says, in the careful tones of a lion tamer, “why do you believe I am the Chesapeake Ripper?”

Will is happy he asked. “I told you, Doctor, you have a certain whimsy, and it’s here in spades. It’s there in all of the Chesapeake Ripper’s murders. There’s a complete disregard for the victims, their humanity, their right to live. You’re mocking them. Just like you mocked Cassie Boyle when you mounted her on that stag.”

Hannibal raises his eyebrows. “You are seeing a connection between the Chesapeake Ripper and the Copycat?”

“Hannibal, don’t—” Jack says. He motions with his wrist, *stop talking.*

“It’s the same sensibility,” Will says, ignoring Jack, staring right into Hannibal’s eyes. “The same wit. The theatricality. The elegance of every choice. The Copycat’s murders, those were just you moonlighting. But this— this is what you do. This is the expression of your deepest self. Your calling. Your philosophy. The curtain rising on the main event.”

“But what is the main event?” Hannibal asks him. “Will, what is it that you’re seeing?”

“Will, don’t answer that,” Jack barks. “Hannibal, stop egging him on.”

Neither of them hears him.

“What do you do with the surgical trophies?” Will asks.

“Why don’t you tell me,” says Hannibal.

“*Jesus Christ*!” Jack roars. “I can’t hear any more of this! Hannibal, you are *not helping.*”

And Hannibal turns on Jack, looking almost peeved. “I am trying to provide some clarity for my patient while he is in the throes of a delusion!”

“This isn’t the kind of clarity we need right now,” Jack says. “Don’t make me ask you to leave.”

Hannibal straightens his vest. Will can see plainly that he’s furious.

“Now,” says Jack. “I need Will to get his head together. Can you do that, Will? What I need from you, right now, is something real on the Ripper.”

And Will becomes furious too. “What I’m telling you *is* real! Look at him! Really, look at him. He flags all the markers of the profile. He’s the right age, he is educated, cultured, he lives smack dab in the middle of the Ripper’s hunting ground, he even was a surgeon for God’s sake!”

Jack curses under his breath. The other FBI agents slowly back away, sensing an imminent explosion.

“Will,” Jack says. “Listen to me now. Hannibal Lecter is not the Chesapeake Ripper.”

“He is!”

“He is helping us catch the Chesapeake Ripper.”

And Will starts laughing, high and furious. “Ohohoho no, Jack. No, he's really not.”

“Will, you’re not thinking straight.”

Will stops laughing. “*I’m* not thinking straight? Jack, I’m not the one who brought the Chesapeake Ripper in to consult on his OWN INVESTIGATION.” From here on in, he can’t stop shouting. “You think it can’t be him because he’s your friend. That’s what he does. He gets so close to you that you can’t see him for what he is. *That’s exactly what he did to me!*”

Ringing silence.

“I’m sorry, Jack,” Hannibal says. He is in full martyrdom mode, staring a penitential hole into the floor between his feet. “I should not have come today. Clearly my being here has triggered him into making an association between the Ripper and his own case.”

“Oh don’t you dare,” Will says, “Don’t you start twisting this around.”

“You’ve been under a great deal of stress, Will. I apologize that I didn’t have the foresight to notify you in advance of my presence in the investigation today. I’ve disturbed your peace of

mind—”

“—Stop it! Stop it! Shut up!”—

“—I’ve inadvertently clouded your judgment, and I know how important it is to you that you be able to do your work—”

“He’s just trying to make me sound like I’m crazy!” Will shrieks.

“He doesn’t have to *make* you sound crazy,” Jack shouts—louder than Will. “*CAN’T YOU SEE YOU’RE DOING ALL THE WORK YOURSELF?*”

And for the first time, Will sees, really sees, just how much trouble Hannibal has landed him in. He sees Jack’s pained expression. The way he is alight with a kind of tragic outrage. He is disappointed in Will. Beyond disappointed.

“You don’t believe me,” Will says, quietly. He looks at the faces of the rest of the team, who are now all backed completely up against the wall. Beverly looks blank, so upset she can’t emote it. Price is white as a sheet. Zeller is the only one who looks like he might be enjoying himself; there is a wild light in his eyes, as if all his suspicions have just been confirmed.

Will’s eyes shudder in his skull. “None of you believe me.”

The silence turns positively funereal.

“Son of a bitch,” Will says. And he begins to laugh, low and dangerous. “What, are all of you complete morons?”

“Will—” says Jack.

“He’s the Ripper,” Will screams, raggedly. He points at Hannibal again, who is watching him through lidded eyes. “He killed Miriam Lass, Jack. He has been playing this game with you for *years*. He orchestrated all of this. He has you marching to his beat and you refuse to see! He dropped this body so that you’d bring it here, to me, knowing I’d figure him out, knowing you won’t believe me.”

Jack’s patience is running out. “Will, if you don’t calm yourself down right now, I’m gonna have to do it for you.”

Will doesn’t hear him. He is staring at Hannibal, he sees the glimmer of triumph in Hannibal’s eyes. “Don’t you see?” he shouts. “He is trying to discredit me forever! He needed to be here, he needed to watch me work it out. He made sure he had a front row seat! Well, was it everything you hoped it’d be? Are you having *fun*?”

The look on Hannibal’s face is indescribable.

Will spins back around to Jack. “You dismiss him as a suspect now, you let him roam free and the bodies’ll keep dropping. They’ll keep on dropping. They’ll never stop!”

“We need some help down here!” Jack roars up the corridor.

Will stares at him. “What are you doing?”

“You’re outta control, Will.”

“No, Jack. Oh, come on. It’s him. He’s doing this to me!” Will screams. “It’s him! IT’S HIM!” And he hammers both arms on the bars.

“We need some help now!” Jack shouts, louder. He spins around to his team. “All of you, get out of here. Wait for me in the lobby. You too, Hannibal.”

“But I might be of assistance—”

“GO!” Jack roars.

And they do. As Hannibal turns to leave, he catches Will’s eye—a flash of blackest malice. Will’s heart begins to speed.

“Jack, you have to believe me—” His voice is shaking so much that he distorts the words.

Barney is jogging down the corridor, syringe in hand.

“*No, Jack*…”

And Jack holds up one arm, silently commanding Barney to wait. He angles his shoulders, turns to Will with the cool precision of an executioner.

“We had an agreement, Will.”

Will stares at him. Can’t speak.

“I told you I’d work with you, but only if I could trust your judgment. Normally I can, I know I can—you’re the keenest hound in the pack—but you are sick right now. I need to give you time to get better, or you may never get back to where you once were.”

A knife in Will’s gut. Slowly twisting. “Jack,” he says, but he has no voice.

Jack’s face is a lament. “I’m gonna need all those files back.”

“No,” Will says. “Jack, no. No no no no no no no.”

“If you don’t want to give them back to me, I’m gonna have Barney here knock you out so we can toss your cell.”

“Jack, you can’t, you can’t. This isn’t happening.” Will clutches the Ripper file to his chest, backs away.

“I’m sorry,” says Jack.

“You have to let me work this case. You have to. Please, Jack. Oh God, *please*.”

“I wish I could. Now, are you gonna give me the files, or do we need to sedate you?”

“No no no no. Jack, no. I need this. Please. Jack, don’t do this.”

And Will starts crying.

Jack and Barney look at each other. Neither of them wants to do it. Both of them know it must be done.

“Please, Jack. Please, don’t do this.” Will’s back hits the wall. Barney is taking out his keys.

Will cries now in earnest. His chest is quaking. He presses the file harder into himself, as if he might absorb its contents through his skin. And just as Barney steps to the lock with keys in hand, something happens inside Will, a disassembling and a reassembling, so fast that he isn’t aware of it happening until it already has. The pendulum swings.

“I know he’s not the Ripper!” he says, through his tears. “I know, Jack. I do know.”

Barney is still unlocking the gate. Jack looks unconvinced.

“He isn’t the Ripper. I just—” Will gulps for air. “I just get confused sometimes. I’m sorry, Jack. I’m so sorry. I know Hannibal is just my psychiatrist. He’s only trying to help. He has been so good to me. But sometimes I get confused.”

Jack motions for Barney to hold off.

“What are you confused about, Will?”.

And Will knows he has him. He cries harder. “I—I—I—know…oh God….”

“*What do you know*?”

“I know I killed them!” Will screams. The sounds rattle down the hallway.

Jack looks stricken. Will feels Jack’s emotions, processes them and plays them right back at him, creating a feedback loop of shock and misery.

“I know I killed all of them,” he says.

“You remember killing them?”

Will shakes his head. “But—but I know I must have. I have dreams where I’m him. Garret Jacob Hobbs. I know it was me. It’s just…sometimes I get confused. I want so badly for it not to be true. I just get confused.”

He is almost at the point of dry heaving. He has hardly any breath left to continue. “Jack,” he croaks. “I need the cases. They’re the only things…that set me right. Please, Jack.”

Jack watches him snivel, his face a mask of solid indecision. Finally, he nods. “You take a day,” he says. “Rest up. We’ll come back.” He nods to Barney, and Barney—who is looking a little shaky himself—retreats back up the corridor.

“Thank you,” Will breathes. “Oh, thank you.”

“All right,” Jack says, uncomfortably. “You rest up now.”

Will nods. He clutches at the Ripper file like it’s a lifebelt.

“Will,” Jack says, emotion now thrumming in his voice. “I’m glad you told me. But you should’ve been honest with me long before now. This Hannibal stuff, it hasn’t helped your case.”

“I know,” Will says. And once more he goes for the kicker, the line he knows Jack likes and truly believes. He gives it to Jack in precisely the tone of voice in which Jack wants to hear it. “I just get confused sometimes, that’s all.”

Jack nods. He looks relieved, finally, to be leaving Will alone. The second he is out of the corridor, Will stops crying, like he just flicked a switch. And in a way, that’s exactly what he’s done. He stops the pendulum. He erases from his face the mask of the murderer whom Jack needed to see. He wipes his eyes with his sleeve, surprised to find that he is only a little bit disgusted with himself. Then he opens the Ripper file, his ill-gotten gain, and begins to read.

Chapter End Notes

Will's memory of the autostereogram of the face of Jesus is very loosely based on a scene from Stephen King's novel *The Shining*. Gotta love them *Shining* references!

Also, I'm sorry. I know that was probably hard to read. (Just kidding, I'm not sorry.)

Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

Two can play at this game. (Role-playing, revisited.)

Chapter Notes

This chapter has some direct callbacks to Will and Hannibal's previous role-playing session. Re-reading that chapter isn't strictly necessary by any means--I can't tell you what to do!--but if you feel like you need a refresher, you can find it here.

Barney comes back two hours later, just before he clocks out for the night. He finds Will hunched on his bed, with his knees drawn up and the Ripper file propped open. He isn't reading; he just stares. The pendulum is still. He is switched off, too emotionally depleted to do much of anything.

The rattle of a medicine cup. "I thought you might want some aspirin," Barney says.

Will blinks in his general direction, not really understanding. But he gets up and goes to the bars, putting the Ripper file under his arm. "What is it?" he asks, taking the cup from Barney.

"Aspirin," Barney repeats. He holds out a plastic cup of water, but Will is already downing the tablet dry.

"Thanks."

"Have some water."

Will obeys mechanically. "Thanks," he says, again.

"Least I can do. You must be feeling rough."

"I'm not… feeling."

Barney nods his understanding. "What you really need is a stiff drink."

At this, Will perks up a little. “Wouldn’t mind a whiskey.”

“Bourbon and soda is my drink,” Barney says. “Just bourbon on the bad days.”

Will gets himself to look as near Barney’s eyes as he can. “You have a lot of bad days here?”

“My fair share.”

Barney’s eyes are steady, gentle, even as it’s apparent they have a lot going on behind them.

“Is this a bourbon and soda day?” Will asks him. “Or a straight bourbon?”

Barney’s sigh has a little whistle at the end of it. “It looked like it was gonna be straight bourbon for a minute there.”

Will looks away, not wanting to re-live that minute.

“Taking those cases away from you would’ve been a crime.” Barney puts a careful emphasis on the word *crime*. “It saves people’s lives, what you do.”

Will rubs his face. “Preaching to the choir, Barney.”

“Yeah, but… you don’t know how rare it is, in this hospital, to actually be around someone who’s… who’s doing real good. In this world. For other people.”

Will’s throat aches. He doesn’t know how Barney can say these things when he has just heard Will confess to five murders.

“Well… takes one to know one,” Will says, directing a very weak smile at the floor. “Thank you for the aspirin.”

He feels far away, so very far away, but the aspirin, his old standby, brings him back a little. The painkiller soothes him, tempers him, restores some of his lost energy reserves, but not enough that he feels comfortable being himself. It is agony, right now, being himself. Better to become someone else.

The pendulum swings. He is Hannibal Lecter and he is the Chesapeake Ripper. He does not see himself as a killer or as an artist. He sees himself, period. A universal constant in a world of changing variables. Life is light and air and color—life is ephemeral, and dazzling, but it cannot be trusted. He, meanwhile, is all solidity and everlasting dark. He cuts through the rest of existence like a knife through tenderloin. Life is entropy, the conversion of the subject into the object. Through practice and hard study he has become a master of this conversion, and in bearing witness to it, he is observing and analyzing the very grist of the business of being. He picks crude living matter for his labors and transmutes it into something fine, something dead. He is performing the world an alchemical service, with the expectation that some day he will be rewarded for his efforts. The reward he most desires is *understanding*.

He wakes up to the drumroll of Alana's angry footsteps.

She stops in front of his cell, sees him in bed. She goes right up to the bars, clutches one tightly for a moment, as if by squeezing it she can rein herself in. She releases the bar, but her voice still shakes as she says, "Sorry; I know it's early."

"It's ok," he says. His voice is rusty from yesterday's screaming. He sits up, rubs his eyes. "I'm awake."

She paces back and forth, her hands on her hips. "There's no real way to preface this, so I'm just going to ask: did you make a confession to Jack Crawford yesterday?"

What a way to wake up. He can only nod.

Alana sighs at the ceiling. "Will, you shouldn't have done that, not without Nigella or me present."

"I wasn't trying to cut a deal, Alana. The circumstances of my confession weren't exactly—uh—*premeditated*."

Her eyebrows draw up. "Were you under duress?"

Will can't help it, he snorts. "Yes, but not the kind of duress you mean."

"If Jack forced it out of you—"

"It was a genuine confession. Can we leave it at that?"

"No," Alana says heatedly. "We can't leave it at that. I need to know everything you told him."

Will finds that he would very much like to go back to sleep. He shuts his eyes. "You can ask the head orderly if you want a play-by-play. He saw it all go down."

"Will, you have to be honest with me about what happened. *Will*…" His eyes are closed, but he knows she is watching him anxiously. "Talk to me. What are you thinking?"

Will says nothing. Honesty isn't a luxury he has any more.

A cold silence as Alana waits for a disclosure that is never going to come. When she speaks again, her voice is trembling. "Up until yesterday you insisted that you weren't responsible for the murders."

"It's a challenge," Will says, opening his eyes, "taking responsibility for something I can't remember."

"Then why confess?"

Will is losing patience. “Alana, you didn’t like it when I said I didn’t kill those people. Now you don’t like it when I say I did. There’s just no pleasing you.”

“This isn’t about *pleasing me*.”

“I am agreeing with you. I am acknowledging that your version of events is the truth. You should be pleased.”

She shakes her head. Paces that frantic figure eight on the other side of the bars. He watches her out of the corners of his eyes and feels no pity. He would tell her what she wants to hear —same way he told Jack—but Alana makes that impossible, because she doesn’t know what she wants. Maybe she has never known.

“I want you to call Karim,” he says. “Tell her she can go ahead with the insanity plea.”

Alana shades her eyes as if stifling a headache. “So you’ve changed your mind about that, too.”

“You were right. It’s the best course of action.”

“Will, *what are you doing*?” Alana watches him with her hands white-fisted at her sides. Then she says, “This has something to do with Hannibal, doesn’t it?”

Will is instantly on guard. Alana is too sharp for her own good.

“I know what happened when he was here,” she continues. “I heard the whole story.”

“Then why are you trying to make me tell it?” Will mutters.

“If this is all an attempt to convince me you’re ok, it isn’t working.”

“I can see that,” he says. “Look, what happened yesterday was a blip. A few neurons misfired. I got confused, I made a scene. But it’s over now. I apologized. It’s done.”

Alana is having none of it. He shifts under the weight of her scrutiny. He feels prodded, laid bare.

“Will,” she says, thin-voiced, “as your friend, and as a member of your legal defense, I have to make a request of you. I have to strongly advise you to: Stop. Seeing. Hannibal.”

Will jerks around, for the first time making eye contact with her.

“I may not have been there yesterday, but I have seen you with him,” she says. “I know what happens to you when you’re around him. He is bad for you.”

Understatement of the century, Will thinks. But what he says, in his hollow liar’s voice, is: “I can’t stop seeing him now. We’re finally making progress working through my delusions.”

“I remain unconvinced you’ve made any progress at all.”

“Dr. Lecter means well.”

“It doesn’t matter. He shouldn’t be your psychiatrist any more. It’s not his fault. And it isn’t yours. Sometimes doctor-patient relationships just go bad. Sometimes they grow toxic. When that happens, the best thing to do—the only thing to do—is sever the tie.”

“I can’t,” Will says.

She throws up her hands. “*Why not*?”

“Because he can help me. I need him.”

Alana shakes her head. “That’s exactly what he said to me.”

As Will has been all but parroting Hannibal for the last two minutes, he is unsurprised to hear this. “And you don’t believe him?”

“I don’t think he can see clearly when it comes to you. I don’t blame him, I know what that’s like. But this—whatever this is that’s going on between the two of you—it has to stop.”

Will watches her through hooded eyes. “I’ll stop seeing him,” he says. And he leans forward. “If *you’ll* stop seeing him.”

She freezes like a rabbit in the dark. “What does that mean?”

His mouth twists. “Playing stupid doesn’t become you.”

She looks slapped. Without turning, she grabs one of the folding chairs and sits heavily upon it.

“Did—um,”—she crosses, then re-crosses, her legs—“did Hannibal say something to you?”

“He didn’t have to.”

She looks like she wants to shrivel on the spot. “I see. Well. I’m not going to deny that I’m embarrassed. Make that mortified. But more than that, I’m sorry.”

And suddenly she is collected, careful again. She knew this was coming, knew that eventually she would be called upon to explain herself to Will.

“I should have confided in you sooner. You must realize that things have been difficult for all of us. I’ve known Hannibal a long time. Longer than I’ve known you. What happened between us was… an indiscretion, at first. I needed some comfort, and so did he—”

Will, who has kept himself anesthetized through most of this conversation, suddenly feels a pang. “Alana, if you value my sanity *at all*, you’ll keep the details to yourself.”

She cringes. “Then I don’t know what you want from me.”

“I want you to stop seeing him.”

“I never promised you I’d wait.” Her eyebrows draw up. “Is that—is that something you wanted me to do?”

“No,” Will says quickly. “I wouldn’t ask that from you. You’re free to look for comfort anywhere you want, from anyone. But not him, do you understand? Never him. He is off-limits.”

“I’m an adult,” she says, angry now. “I make my own choices—”

“Not when they’re terrible ones. Alana, you can’t trust him. He is taking advantage of you when you are at your most vulnerable. And he’s gonna keep you that way for as long as he can. He made the first move, didn’t he? But after that, I bet he made it all seem like your idea. At every turn he told you he wanted to take things slowly, he handled you like you were made of glass, but he knew that wasn’t what you really wanted. You want to be taken seriously, treated like an equal. Not cherished, but *challenged*. So you pushed him, didn’t you? You pushed him further, and pushed him further, and maybe he pretends to have reservations, but it is an act, Alana. Everything he does is an act. The truth is that *he* is the one who’s doing the pushing—”

Her chair falls back with a clatter. She stands up. She shakes. She speaks, in a voice guttural with rage:

“When you said you didn’t want details, I didn’t realize it was because you’d already made up all of them yourself.”

And Will comes back from wherever he went. He hadn’t meant for most of that to come out. He covers his face, awash with self-loathing.

“You need help,” Alana tells him. “But Hannibal shouldn’t be the one to give it to you.”

She makes a move to storm off, but she thinks better of it. Turns back. “You should have seen him last night. I know I said he was bad for you, but you have no idea how bad you are for him. He is *suffering*, he is wearing himself out trying to help you. After what you said about him in front of Jack, he was so upset. He doesn’t let you see it, Will, but you are hurting him.”

It is all Will can do not to laugh. He keeps his hands over his face in the hopes that she will tire of him and go away forever.

But Alana isn’t so easily driven off. “Hannibal has offered to visit you later today, to continue your sessions as normal. But he understands if you need a day to recover, after what happened yesterday. Please, Will, at least let me tell him to leave you alone for *one day*.”

Will takes his hands away from his face. He isn’t about to say no to Hannibal. Not now. Not any more. If Hannibal is given the day off from seeing Will, he could use his free time to go a-ripping.

“Sorry, Alana,” he says. “No can do. Dr. Lecter and I just have *so much* to talk about…”

Before Hannibal can even complete the long walk down the corridor, Will is planted in his chair, facing the bars with back straightened and face blanked. He has left the Ripper file open and spread across the desk, bold as day.

“Hello, Dr. Lecter,” he says, conversationally, his neck swiveling as he tracks the good doctor’s approach.

“Hello, Will.”

Hannibal’s eyes travel from him to the Ripper file and back. His face is inscrutable, but Will thinks—hopes—he sees anticipation there. Hannibal pulls out a folding chair, sits down.

“I am glad you are feeling well enough to speak with me.”

“Wouldn’t miss it for the world,” Will says.

Hannibal composes himself, takes out his little notebook and his pen, the very picture of the polite and dutiful listener. “You had an eventful day yesterday. Where would you like to begin?”

Will answers in a voice without color. “With an apology.”

Hannibal’s eyebrows inch upward. “To whom are you apologizing?”

“To you, of course. I’m sorry for what I said. I hope I didn’t embarrass you in front of Jack.”

What little emotion there is on Hannibal’s face vacates it instantly. He looks even more like a death mask than usual. “And what is it that you regret saying to Jack?”

“I regret accusing you of being the Chesapeake Ripper.”

“Why does that cause you regret?”

Will allows himself the smallest of smiles. “Because it isn’t true.”

Hannibal waits one beat longer than normal before responding. “So you no longer believe I am the Ripper?”

“I see now that it was a delusion,” Will says, eyes glittering.

“Ah.” There is murder in Hannibal’s exhale. “I assume that is the essence of what you said to Jack, after I was forced to take my leave.”

“I told him the truth. I get delusions. They confuse me. A lot of them are concerning you. But I’m aware of them now, which means I have enough control over them so that I can continue consulting for the FBI.”

“I see,” says Hannibal. He begins drumming the fingers of his right hand against his knee.

“It’s a lucky thing Jack believed me. Otherwise he’d have thrown me off the Ripper case and confiscated my files. And that would have been such a shame, don’t you agree?”

He looks pointedly at Hannibal’s fingers. Hannibal stops drumming them.

“That isn’t the only claim you made to Jack,” Hannibal says. “There is also the matter of your confession.”

“There isn’t much to say about that,” Will says, in an offhand voice completely unlike his own. “I know I killed Abigail. And Georgia Madchen. And Marissa Schuur, Cassie Boyle, and Dr. Sutcliffe. I don’t remember doing any of it, of course, but I’ve finally accepted that I must have been responsible. There’s no other explanation for what happened. No plausible one, anyway.”

Hannibal is smiling now. It is the scalpel smile, the smile that cuts. “Will,” he says, “I do not appreciate being lied to.”

Will pulls an innocent face. “I’m not lying.”

“I would have thought a false confession to be beneath you. But apparently I underestimated the lengths to which you are willing to go in order to preserve your working relationship with Jack.”

Will smiles now, too. “Why, Dr. Lecter, how can you be sure my confession was a fake? Aren’t you the one who keeps telling everyone I’m a murderer?”

He is shaking, not with fear but with delight. Who knew provoking a dangerous serial killer could be so entertaining?

Hannibal’s lips have gone so thin that they are threatening to disappear entirely. “You wish to punish me for yesterday,” he says. “I understand the impulse, though I cannot condone your choice of methods. This won’t do, Will.”

Will raises his eyebrows, slowly, cartoonishly. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Which makes Hannibal spend a full minute taking slow breaths through his nose.

Will twiddles his thumbs, smiling to himself. “You don’t have much to say today, Doctor.”

“I have no desire to converse with a pale shade of you.”

Hannibal is drumming his fingers again.

“I must be boring you,” Will says.

“You could never bore me.” And suddenly Hannibal’s gaze is so direct, so penetrating, that Will feels as though Hannibal is looking right through him, at the bones and muscles and organs beneath his skin.

“But I do insist on honesty from my patients at all times. Otherwise I can hardly be effective in my therapy.”

Will clenches his jaw, suffers through the stare. He says: “Honesty is a two-way street, Dr. Lecter.”

Hannibal goes very still, a panther scenting prey. “Indeed. Is that what you require of me, Will? A trade? My truth, for yours?”

“*Quid pro quo*,” says Will, steel-plating the words.

Hannibal nods. He puts his notebook and pen away. When he has straightened up, he says: “Then I believe the time has come when we must resume our role-playing.”

Inside Will, a crescendo. “Resume it?” he says. “Did we ever stop?”

Hannibal tilts his head, solicitous. “Why don’t you indulge me and become the person you were yesterday, before Jack Crawford forced you to turn over your new leaf.”

“Only if you indulge me and become the Chesapeake Ripper. If it isn’t too much trouble.”

“None at all,” says Hannibal politely. “Shall we begin?”

“Yes, let’s.”

Hannibal relaxes his shoulders. Will scoots to the edge of his chair. Masks off.

“You motherfucker,” says Will.

Hannibal narrows his eyes, but he lets the foul language pass without comment.

“You set me up,” Will says. “*Again*.”

“I set a trap. You are the one who walked into it. More fool you, I’d say.”

Will stares. Despite having just done everything in his power to procure Hannibal’s honesty, he is neither used to, nor prepared for it.

“Did you think you’d won?” he asks, voice shaking. “I bet you did, for a minute there.”

“A check, perhaps,” says Hannibal. “I would not be so arrogant as to assume checkmate.”

“But now I know who you are. And I’m still on the case. This could get awfully inconvenient for you.”

“I can endure a little inconvenience. It was worth it, for the opportunity to watch you work me out. You should have seen yourself, Will. You presented quite a sight. You figured it out faster than I’d guessed.”

“Were you… timing me?” Will feels a mixture of his own revulsion and Hannibal’s excitement. “How long did I take?”

“Between my handing you the file and the penny dropping? Six seconds by my count.” Hannibal changes the subject fast as lightning. “I could tell Jack, you realize. That your confession was something less than heartfelt.”

“You could try. But I assure you, I was very convincing.” Will examines Hannibal and smiles. “Ah, you’ve already tried. And he didn’t listen to you. Of course he didn’t. Jack believes what he wants to believe about me, always has. Don’t try too hard to get me thrown off your case, Dr. Lecter. It’ll start looking a little suspicious for you after awhile.”

Hannibal looks unamused. “How long do you plan to keep up this new charade of yours? I don’t expect you will be able to maintain it indefinitely.”

“I have more patience than you,” Will says.

“That I doubt.”

“I’m not the one who makes a habit of killing people who annoy me.”

Hannibal slowly smiles. “Is that what you believe I do?”

Will picks up one of the crime scene photographs of the latest Ripper victim. “What was his offense? Did he wear white after Labor Day?”

He does not expect an answer to this open provocation, but Hannibal says:

“He ignored the old adage, ‘the customer is always right.’ I find that to be an unforgivable lapse when one is in the customer service industry.”

Will can’t help it, he is thrown. Hannibal was not nearly so forthcoming during their last role-playing session. “Bad customer service,” he says. “That’s all he did?”

“And that’s all he will ever do.” Hannibal gives a chilling little shrug.

The hot prickle of new sweat on Will’s skin. He has the sudden intimation that his days on this planet are numbered, that Hannibal would never be so blasé in pouring out the truth unless he figured his chosen vessel would soon be smashed forever.

But he recovers himself. He must keep going, get as much out of Hannibal as he can while Hannibal is in this gregarious mood. “What about the mirrors? You broke them because… what? You thought he was vain?”

Hannibal sniffs. “Rather literal of you, Will. Everyone is vain. Even you have your vanity. A dangerous type of vanity, believing you can catch me. But that wasn’t why I chose the mirrors.”

“Then why?”

“You tell me.”

Will shakes his head; this, at least, is a move he knows how to counter. “That isn’t the game. You’re the Chesapeake Ripper right now, not me.”

“Then let us change the game.”

Will shakes his head again. Keeps the pendulum still. He won’t give Hannibal that pleasure again.

“Very well,” Hannibal says. “But you are playing yourself in our little game. And you already know why I chose the mirrors.”

Will looks down at the photograph: the bloodstained shards of glass, the mirrors with cracks like gaping mouths. “I… don’t know.”

“You do,” says Hannibal firmly. “Relax your mind. Remember.”

Will shuts his eyes. “You… you said you regarded yourself too highly… to break a mirror.”

He opens his eyes, he looks up—and it is all he can do not to gasp. Hannibal is smiling at him, openmouthed, *all teeth*.

“Oh, no,” Hannibal says. “It was *you* who said that, Will.”

Will feels the blood leaving his face, retreating from his hands. It’s the only part of him permitted to flee.

“*You*, not me.” Hannibal continues, the low pulse of victory in his voice. “You only thought you were me at the time. Is it becoming harder to separate your thoughts from mine? The mirror was your idea. But I admit I rather liked it. So I… ah… appropriated it. I thought you might appreciate the joke.”

“I don’t,” Will says, voicelessly.

“How often do you play at being me?”

Will’s heart is in his throat. “As often as I need to.”

Hannibal tsks. “More often than that. You promised me honesty, Will. *Quid pro quo*. You lie awake in the dark of your little cage, don’t you? With my work displayed above your head like fine art. You shut your eyes and when you open them, you become me. Not many avenues open to you, not many opportunities for fun. Do you enjoy being me, Will? Do you enjoy looking at the world through my eyes? I suspect you do.”

“I am trying to catch you,” Will says. He is seething, he is scared.

Hannibal’s eyes are gouging him, as if they might scrape the truth from the back of his skull. Will has the stray panicked thought that this must be what it is like for other people to sit across from *him*, to listen powerlessly as he spouts the unpleasant details of their inner lives, making public their every private thought. And in this moment he hates himself more than he hates Hannibal.

“It is nothing to be ashamed of,” Hannibal says easily. “I enjoy being me as well. I have my freedom. I have power over my surroundings. I take delight in them. Tell me, Will. I’m very curious. What do you enjoy most about being me?”

“I’m done with role-play for today,” Will says quietly.

“Answer the question,” Hannibal says, a new harshness in his voice. “*Quid pro quo*. I’ve given you my truth, you owe me yours.”

Will shakes his head, stares at the floor.

“I believe I know your answer. It’s not my freedom you like best. It isn’t the power. It’s Alana Bloom’s company, isn’t it?”

Will shivers in his seat. His eyes leap to Hannibal’s, then leap away. Hannibal has a lazy smile, like a cat with cream.

“I wish you’d leave her out of this,” Will mutters.

“Don’t flatter yourself,” Hannibal says. “My reasons for courting Alana are many, and none of them have anything to do with you. She has always been very dear to me.”

Will can’t bear it. He leaves his seat. He wanders to the back of his cell, arms wrapped around his chest. It’s the most distance he can put between himself and Hannibal.

“And you were right,” Hannibal says. “She is indeed very kissable.”

“If you hurt her…” is all Will can say.

“Why would I hurt Alana? That role, it seems, you’ve reserved for yourself. And you have proved so very skilled at it.”

Will is in the corner now.

“Well,” Hannibal says, standing up. “I believe that is enough for today. Role-playing has become a very profitable exercise for us. We understand each other better now, wouldn’t you agree?”

Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

The real investigation begins.

Jack returns the next day as promised, BAU team in tow. Will can tell that they've been briefed, but even a stern talking to from Jack can't completely iron out the agents' skittishness. Price now speaks in a hospital bedside hush. Zeller retreats to his outpost near the radiator and avoids looking at Will, as if fearing Will's disease may prove transmittable through eye contact. Will isn't upset by these regressions; the one thing that depresses him is that even Beverly has clammed up. She crosses her arms in front of her and greets him with a simple nod. Jack is the only person apparently unaffected by the events of two days past. He says hello to Will as if nothing has happened, but his eyes do flash in warning when Will immediately asks:

"Where is Dr. Lecter?"

Which makes Price blanch and Zeller smirk.

Jack's answer is fast and firm. "He won't be joining us today."

Will raises his eyebrows. "Is he off the case?"

"You're both still consulting, but you'll be doing it separately. Dr. Bloom's orders, and I agree with her."

"That isn't necessary," Will says, annoyed. He wants Hannibal right here, in front of his cell, at all times. He doesn't care what lacerating mind game Hannibal inflicts on him; better that than having Hannibal off gallivanting in the wild, leaving corpses in his wake. "I saw him yesterday, I apologized for, uh… for what happened. It's water under the bridge, Jack. I can work with him."

"Happy as I am to hear that," Jack says, skeptically, "it doesn't change the fact that I need you clear and in control if we're gonna make any headway with the Ripper. I can't have you flying off the handle and pointing the finger at your psychiatrist, *ok*?"

"Ok," Will grumbles. "It won't happen again." It will, of course it will, but next time he'll have proof.

“It shouldn’t interfere with the profile,” Jack says. “Hannibal will see all your work. And you’ll see his.” He holds up a document.

Will has no doubt he’ll be seeing Hannibal’s work and plenty of it, in all its bloody permutations, but he knows better than to say this out loud. He takes the document from Jack.

Hannibal’s work turns out to be a slender dossier hypothesizing that the Ripper is an embittered former surgeon who may have lost his medical license due to negligence, malpractice, and/or institutional politics, who has assumed the identity of the Chesapeake Ripper as a way of demonstrating his nerve, intelligence, and surgical prowess, and as a method of seeking revenge on the people he perceives as enemies.

“What’s the verdict?” Jack asks, as Will reads it.

Will’s verdict is that it’s the funniest two pages of fiction he has read in a while, but he gives a thoughtful hum and says, “As theories go, it’s plausible.”

Jack sounds excited. “Connects a lot of dots. Jimmy’s looking into medical malpractice suits in the last ten years and Beverly is contacting the hospitals directly. We’ll see what we find.”

“Mmm,” says Will, certain they’ll find nothing but wild geese. He hands the document back to Jack. “Fine. But I want to go in a different direction.”

“What direction is that?”

“We’ve worked the surgeon angle before; we’ve hit it hard the last two Ripper cycles. At this point we’ve looked at every surgeon on the Eastern Seaboard and it’s never led us anywhere near the Ripper. I don’t think he’s a practicing surgeon any more. If he were, we’d have found him by now.”

Jack knocks the dossier with the side of his hand. “But that’s just what Hannibal’s saying! A non-practicing surgeon. Someone who lost his license.”

“I’m not saying I disagree with Dr. Lecter,” Will says, quickly, delicately. “I just want to work a new angle, one that discounts surgery altogether.”

Jack frowns in thought. “What else do we have to go on? All we can say for sure about the Chesapeake Ripper is that he is a sadist with surgical training.”

Will crouches down, spreads the Ripper file across the floor of his cell, pulling out the paper clips so that he can see the faces of each of the victims. “We know more than that,” he says. “Let’s focus on how he’s choosing his victims.”

Zeller raises his hand. “Um…randomly?” The others look around at him. “What? It’s true. The Ripper chooses his victims randomly.”

“It isn’t random,” says Will.

“He’s killed every class, every creed, every color,” Zeller insists. “The only victim pattern the Chesapeake Ripper has is that he doesn’t have a victim pattern.”

“Consistently inconsistent,” Beverly says, with a nod. It kills Will that she is agreeing with Zeller over him.

“You’re not seeing a pattern because he doesn’t *want* you to see a pattern. It’s just like how he uses the abdominal mutilations to disguise his surgical precision when removing the organs. There is a real pattern here, but he is deliberately obscuring it. He chooses these people: he stalks them, hunts them, and brutalizes them while they’re still alive. He has his reasons for picking them, for *punishing* them; there is a pattern here.”

“He’s punishing them for disgraceful behavior,” Jack says. “That’s what you said before. He thinks of them as pigs, not people.”

Will nods. “They do something to offend him and he chastises them for their transgressions with humiliation, mutilation and murder.”

A note of impatience in Jack’s voice. “We know all this already, Will.”

He runs his hands over his face. “Ok, but listen. Just listen. There’s nothing to link him personally to any of the victims, right? He is a stranger to them. But he meets them before he kills them, otherwise how could he form an opinion about them? He meets them long enough to dismiss them as ants beneath his feet. So where does he meet them? What’s the point of contact?”

Jack looks at the row of photographs. “Different victims, different places.”

“Consistently inconsistent,” nods Price.

“We’ve tried reconstructing the victims’ last movements and come up with nothing,” Beverly puts in.

“There is no pattern,” Zeller says, enunciating every syllable.

Will is feeling put upon, but he can’t lash out; it is important that at all times he remain as sensible and sane as he can be. He takes five of the photographs, spins on his heel, and begins taping them to the wall behind him, the one adjacent to his evidence wall for the copycat murders.

“No pattern that connects all of the victims,” he says. “I agree with you there. But what about patterns that connect *some* of the victims? Take these five. Jason Beeman, the Ripper’s most recent. He freelanced for an electronics company, he performed home installations of high-end sound systems. Michelle Vocalson, her company fitted and sold tailored coats, average retail price fourteen hundred dollars. Darrell Ledgerwood was a rare books dealer who operated out of a tiny outfit near Johns Hopkins; most of his customers were professors there. Elizabeth Fryers sold antiques; she specialized in Louis XIV chairs. Elan Wallace had a string of jobs as a stock boy, but his last job before he was murdered was at a warehouse that sold fine wine.”

He turns back around to face the team.

“The common factor here is luxury. Fine things. I think the Ripper encountered each of these victims in their workplaces, over the course of his daily life. Which means, we know something about his daily life, the places he goes. He has taste. He is affluent. Cultured. He likes art—the theatricality of his crimes is a testament to that. He has an eye. He’s cosmopolitan. A city-dweller. Either Baltimore or D.C. would be my guess, leaning towards Baltimore since more than half of his victims come from there. Philadelphia isn’t out of the question either. Whatever city he lives in, I wouldn’t be surprised if he’s involved in its local arts community. He is social, he is charming, and he’s moving in elite circles. He thinks he’s untouchable.”

“So he’s a One Percenter,” Price says.

“Doesn’t exactly narrow things down,” grumbles Zeller.

“Narrows it down to one percent,” Beverly says. “That’s a start.”

“A rich guy who likes art?” Zeller throws up his hands. “So few of those out there.”

“Hey,” says Jack, voice raised. “Hear Will out.”

Will nods his thanks to Jack. He then looks at Zeller, right at him, bruising eye contact, long enough to make Zeller squirm. “He’s not just a rich guy who likes art. He is a consummate consumer. It’s likely that he has shopped at one or more of the businesses where the victims worked. We need the names of their customers. Mailing lists, purchase orders, credit card receipts. See if there are any names that keep popping up, and if any of those names belong to people who have surgical training. That’ll narrow things down some, wouldn’t you say?”

Zeller is sulking; he doesn’t look convinced. Jack isn’t exactly a believer, either.

“It’s still a wide net,” he says.

“Well, it’s all I’ve got right now.” Will is casting a wide net because if he makes it any tighter, Jack will know exactly which fish he’s trying to catch.

“All right,” says Jack. “Beverly, work on getting me those customer lists. No, wait, make it Z; I want Bev’s help on something else. You too, Will.”

Will has been examining the photos of the five people he suspects were murdered due to their poor customer service skills, but now he turns back to Jack.

“Take a look at this,” Jack says, handing him another folder.

Will flips open the cover, sees the photo of a familiar FBI trainee. “Miriam Lass?”

“Her transcripts from the Academy. I want you to get to know her.”

Will frowns, says nothing. He knows Miriam is a sensitive subject for Jack.

Jack eases a very thick file into Beverly’s arms. “The medical records she was examining. For all of the Ripper’s victims as of two-and-a-half years ago. Go through them, see if you

can reconstruct her investigation, figure out what she found that led her to the Ripper."

"But we've already tried retracing Miriam's steps," Beverly says gently, as she tries not to stagger under the weight of the records. She, like Will, realizes that Miriam is dangerous territory. "We didn't get anywhere."

"Will can get somewhere," Jack says, with total confidence thrumming in his voice. "Get into her head. Apply her investigative methods to those records and see what you find. Tell Beverly what to look for and she'll help you do it."

Will fidgets nervously. He approaches the bars and speaks in an undertone. "I'm sorry, Jack but that trail's gone cold. I've already told you, the surgery angle isn't how we're gonna find the Ripper."

Jack seems to grow several inches in height. He booms: "*She* found him that way. So can you."

All Will can do is nod.

The rest of the team clears out, returning to the Ripper taskforce headquarters at Quantico. Only Beverly remains. She doesn't look pleased at this turn of events. A resounding thud as she drops the medical records on one of the folding chairs. Will watches her in silence. Then he says:

"I guess you drew the short straw."

She looks at him, eyebrows arched.

"Jack saddled you with a thankless task that won't lead you anywhere. And you'll have to work with me, which… uh… nobody seems all that eager to do."

Beverly crosses her arms over her chest. "Jack gave me this task because I'm the only one who doesn't have a problem working with you."

Her enthusiasm is underwhelming. "Well…" Will says. "Glad you don't have a problem."

She shifts on the spot, like someone undergoing a minor torture. "Look, I don't know a great way to say this…"

"You don't have to walk on eggshells around me, Beverly. You never have before."

She nods. "I'm not good with eggshells. It was easier before. I just drew a line between who you are now and who you were,"—her eyes leap to the copycat photographs—"while you were sick. I put all that stuff behind us, because I thought I recognized the person you are now. The you from before you got sick. The *real* you."

"This *is* the real me," Will says, quietly. It's mostly not a lie.

She shakes her head. "It's a stupid distinction. It doesn't mean anything. The other day… " She sighs. "It was a wake up call, that's all. I realize now that I can't pretend like nothing

happened. You killed five people, Will. You're in a mental hospital. You're not who you were before. You can't be. "

"No…" he says, with a hard swallow. "Guess not."

She dips her head and jerks her shoulders, an upset shrug. "Sorry. That's me when I'm not on the eggshells."

"You don't have to apologize."

"Yeah, I probably do." She quirks her mouth, more a grimace than a smile, as she swings her jacket over her shoulder. "I'll make it up to you with lunch. There's a great pizza place not too far from here. They don't deliver; I'll have to pick it up."

"Sure," Will says, understanding by her offer that she needs some time to collect herself before she can face him again. "That'd be great."

She is gone long enough for him to tape up photographs of each of the Ripper's fifteen victims; he keeps the five dead service workers in a line, groups the rest on the wall underneath them. Off to one side he isolates two of the photographs, those of Miriam Lass and Dr. Carson Nahn. Their murders were different; they were crimes of circumstance. Hannibal Lecter killed Miriam because she found him, and he killed Nahn to help Jack find Abel Gideon. Will looks at the photo of Nahn for a long time; there is something disgusting about the psychiatrist's death in retrospect. It is Hannibal at his most gruesome and at his most helpful. He could have communicated his tip-off through a note or through another cryptic phone call, but instead he left them Nahn's body. With complete indifference Hannibal took another life, because he knew that Will would see his work and be able interpret it, translate the message and hand it over to Jack. He had used Nahn, and by extension Will, like a fucking telephone.

Will realizes he is biting his nails again. Stops. Picks up Miriam Lass's school transcript instead, and that's how Beverly finds him: sitting on the floor, back against his new evidence wall, reading Miriam's file with a dubious expression on his face.

She notices his new additions to the wall, but doesn't mention them. She lays the pizza box on the floor with deliberate casualness and asks: "Anything helpful in there?"

Will tosses the folder aside. "Nothing Jack couldn't have told us himself. Miriam Lass had a spotless record. She was ambitious, sharp, thorough. She would have made a great agent. What kind of pizza is that?"

"Margherita. Thought I'd keep things simple."

"Simple." Will snorts. "Good luck with that. Smells amazing, though."

They dig in. Beverly is back to being friendly, but there is something affected about her manner that sets Will's teeth on edge. They chat idly as they eat, but the conversation soon lapses into silence. Beverly returns to safer ground—the task at hand.

“Miriam went looking through these records even though she didn’t have a warrant,” she says, as she adds another half-moon to the little mound of uneaten crusts on her plate. “That kind of behavior takes guts, especially coming from a trainee.”

“Sure,” Will says, wiping his mouth, “she had guts. But there’s nothing in her file to suggest she was prone to taking unnecessary risks. The day she disappeared, she didn’t tell anyone where she was going and she didn’t call for backup. Wherever she went, I don’t think she expected to find the Ripper there. She probably thought she was going on just another routine interview. He took her by surprise.”

“So what are we looking for?” Beverly asks, nudging the stack of medical records with her foot. “Something routine?”

Will shrugs. “Could be anything. A name. An address. It won’t be obvious, and it won’t be anything directly connected to the victims. She went on a tangent. She was looking for someone to help provide her with some context.”

“So… needle in a haystack,” Beverly says, eyeing the pile of records. “A *big* haystack.”

“Like I said.” Will claps the crumbs from his fingers. “The short straw.”

Beverly is trying to talk herself into it. “Jack doesn’t want Miriam’s death to have been for nothing. I get that.”

“I get it, too,” Will says, quickly. “But Jack loses all perspective when it comes to Miriam. The Ripper knows that, and so do we.”

Beverly makes a small noise of agreement. She doesn’t like hearing people speak ill of Jack.

They finish their lunch and begin going through the medical records. It is dull, dusty work, and after an hour Will loses patience and asks to borrow Beverly’s laptop. “As long as it’s not for porn,” she says, handing it through the bars.

“Tailored coats,” Will says. “Let’s see if this boutique has a mailing list.”

Beverly, up to her neck in medical files, shoots him a look. “Didn’t Jack put Brian on that?”

“Yeah, and I’m sure he’ll get around to it eventually. After the Ripper adds enough organs to his collection that he finishes his cycle.”

“Brian can be kind of an asshole,” Beverly says, a wry warning in her voice. “But he’s not that big of an asshole. He’ll follow your lead.”

Will ignores her; he is reading about designer men’s outerwear. It is a world he knows very little about, but it is Hannibal’s world, which means Will better become an expert, and fast.

Beverly watches him disengage from her work. She makes a crotchety little noise as she returns to the mountain of medical records. They work in silence: Will making notes on luxury goods, Beverly occassionally writing down the name of a doctor tangentially related to one of the Ripper’s victims.

After about forty minutes of this, Beverly says, “Oh.” Her voice is dull, flattened. It makes the hair on Will’s arms stand on end.

“What?” he asks.

She is holding a piece of paper, her eyes working it over and over as if there’s some cypher written there.

“What is it?”

“Nothing,” she says, still reading the paper. “Sorry, just—um.”

She looks almost frightened.

He closes the laptop and turns to her pointedly.

She snaps out of whatever spell she’s under. “Forget it. Never mind.” She hurriedly discards the paper on the stack behind her.

“You found something,” Will says.

Beverly wipes her forehead, purses her lips. She looks like she may be in actual physical pain. Finally she speaks in a voice slightly lower than normal. “You said Hannibal Lecter used to be a surgeon. What kind?”

For a second he just looks at her, eyes wide, not comprehending.

“What kind of surgeon was he, Will?”

“Trauma surgeon.”

“At Maryland-Misericordia?”

He nods, warily. She, too, is wary, as she reaches back for the paper behind her. “He’s here, on Jeremy Olmstead’s intake form. On duty in the ER, the same night Olmstead was admitted with a hunting injury.”

He levers his arm up with all the dexterity of a store mannequin. He takes the form and his eyes fly immediately to the name, neatly printed at the top of the admissions log. Hannibal Lecter, marked down in un-smudged ink on the same piece of paper as the name of one of his victims. This paper, millimeters thick, is more precious to Will in this moment than his sanity or his own fluttering heart.

“You were right,” Beverly says.

Which gives him a hell of a jolt.

But then she says: “You do have a terrible poker face.”

She motions for him to hand the paper back to her. His fingers ache to clutch it, keep it, but he knows he has to return it.

Beverly takes the form. Her face is grim. “You still think it’s him,” she says, “don’t you?”

“What?” But his voice is unsteady. “Nooo.”

Beverly leans back, slaps the admissions log down on the large pile behind her. She shuts her eyes, covers her mouth with one hand, and says: “Oh, *Will*…”

“I don’t think it’s him. But still. You should add his name to your list.”

She shakes her head. “You’re unbelievable.”

Will is doing everything in his power to continue speaking normally. “It isn’t surprising you found him in those records. Baltimore isn’t that big of a place, there aren’t that many surgeons working there. *Beverly*,”—for she is still shaking her head, silent and aghast, not listening to a word he’s saying— “I don’t think it’s him. Really. But we can’t discount a suspect just because we happen to know him.”

She takes her hand away from her face. “We vetted Lecter,” she says. “I interviewed him myself, remember? He is clean.”

“You vetted him for the copycat case. Never for the Ripper.”

Which makes her groan in earnest. “You are still investigating him!”

It isn’t a question, so he doesn’t answer it.

“Fuck,” says Beverly. “Jack said you dropped this, Will. You promised him. You told him you have periods of lucidity where you’re aware that all of this is crazy. What, were you *lying* so he’d let you continue working the case?” She looks at him, the lines of her face tightening until she is wearing a mask of horror. “What about your confession? That a lie, too?”

His expression is all the answer she needs.

“*Fuck*!” She pulls herself to her knees. “I have to tell Jack.”

“I would really prefer if you didn’t,” he says, quietly.

“You faked a murder confession so you could get yourself access to classified information.” Her voice is shaking. “You *are* unstable. I shouldn’t be here. I want my laptop back.”

He hands it over immediately, his eyes on the ground. He says, “I’m not unstable. I want to catch the Chesapeake Ripper. Same as you.”

“You want to catch Hannibal Lecter,” Beverly says, zipping her laptop away. “There’s a big difference.”

“There is no difference. They are one and the same. He was on that admissions log, Beverly. And he’ll be in other places too, you’ll see.”

Swearing under her breath, she piles the records—that precious admissions log buried somewhere in their midst—into her shoulder bag, thrusts the empty pizza box under her arm, and stands up.

“I’m sorry for lying to you,” Will says hastily. “I value your opinion. And your friendship. I wouldn’t have lied if there’d been any other option. *Bev*,”—which makes her look at him, face twisted with misery—“please. Hate me, if you wanna hate me. Just… don’t tell Jack.”

She wipes her hand quickly across her eyes. “Ugh,” she says, and storms off.

He curls up on the floor, buries his face in his knees. Now Beverly has the power to destroy him, and she’s probably angry enough to do it ten times over.

He spends the rest of the day listening for footsteps, waiting for the march of the orderlies, come to toss his cell and seize his work. He knows he has the Ripper file on borrowed time, so he studies and he studies hard; he opens himself up, his cognition burning like a supernova, absorbing everything. He reads until lights out, and then by the emergency lights he keeps reading until his eyes smart with the strain. Every sound makes him jump. Every shadow is the night orderly with a needle in hand, there to tranquilize him and take away his things. He mentally berates himself for not doing a better job with the admissions log; if he’d played it cool, passed the whole thing off as meaningless, maybe he could have convinced Beverly that his suspicions of Hannibal had been put to bed. If, instead of Beverly, he’d been paired with Price or Zeller, he could have managed it. The problem with Beverly is that Will genuinely likes her; he dropped his guard with her, was too honest, because deep down he wants her, so very badly, to believe him.

Suddenly, a smear of red across Andrew Caldwell’s cell phone records. Will realizes that he has bitten his nails bloody again. Tearing his fingers away from his mouth, he balls his hands into fists that throb and sting. He shuts his eyes, knocks the back of his skull three times, hard, against the bricks.

Footsteps that are not footsteps in the corridor. A creature stalking by, its body ridged and emaciated, blacker than the shadows. Will stays very still, trying not to attract its notice. But it scents the air—it smells the blood. Its head snaps to, antlers spreading like spilled ink beyond the bars of the cell. Its fathomless eyes make contact with Will’s.

Will scrambles to the far corner of his cell, crouches down with his back against the Ripper wall. “Go away,” he pleads.

The creature wraps its many-jointed fingers around the bars. It makes a low noise, a rasp, a beckoning.

Will's lungs are burning. He tries to fill them. Can't. He hears himself choking, but the sounds are tinny. He is listening to his fear from a very great distance away.

The creature begins pulling the bars apart.

"No…" The bars bend beneath its grip. "No," Will moans. "Don't."

Whirling tendrils of black bone as the creature lowers its head. It crawls through the gap between the bars. It is in his cell with him.

"You're not real," Will says, wide-eyed. "None of this is real. A hallucination. I'm sick and this is my hallucination."

The creature crawls towards him, its long limbs crackling like dry paper as they brush the floor. Will tries to force himself to his feet, but he is boneless in his corner. He can't breathe.

A ponderous claw, outstretched, yawing at his face. The cold touch of its rough fingers on the side of his throat. Its breath is hot on his face, putrid, and then he sees its *teeth*—

Footsteps. Real footsteps this time. He jerks awake, all but leaps out of bed. His neck is all cricks; he must have fallen asleep sitting up. It takes him ten seconds to realize that Barney is in front of his cell with a breakfast tray.

"You ok?" Barney asks.

"Yes!" Will rubs his face, hard. "I—uh. Was dreaming."

"Well, it's time to wake up. You have a visitor."

Jack, obviously Jack, come to ream him out for lying. Will blinks at Barney in a panic.

"Should I tell her to come back later?"

Her. Will lets out a breath. "No, I'm ok. I can see her now."

Barney gives him the tray and goes back up the corridor. When he returns, Beverly is with him. She looks pale, rough-edged. "Thanks, Barney," she says, voice still clogged with sleep.

As Barney leaves them to it, Will stares at Beverly. He has no idea what to expect. "How'd you get here so early?" he hazards.

Beverly drops her heavy shoulder bag on the floor. "Slept in a hotel. Not that I did much sleeping."

None of this is adding up. "I didn't think you'd come back," he says.

"Neither did I." She takes a breath, pulls out a folding chair, collapses on to it. "I have something to show you," she whispers. "Sit down and promise me you won't interrupt, or try to explain, or say anything…*at all*. Can you do that?"

“Why are you whispering?” Will asks, as he sits on the edge of his bed.

She swats a hand, actually shhs him. “Just shut up, ok? Let me talk.”

He is slightly annoyed and utterly confused, but he closes his mouth as ordered.

Beverly opens her bag, retrieves a sheaf of paper. “Mailing lists for the antiques dealership and the coat boutique. I’ve highlighted the relevant name.” She hands him the papers. “Don’t say anything,” she reminds him.

He looks down and sees that Beverly has run through Hannibal’s name with a pink highlighter. He keeps his face perfectly composed, his breathing even. He hands the papers back to her like they mean nothing to him.

She hands him another form. “List of people who received physical examinations from Andrew Caldwell. Relevant name’s highlighted.”

Hannibal Lecter, again in pink.

Will says nothing. He hands it back to Beverly.

She bends her head, staring down at the papers in her lap. She isn’t ready to look at him, not yet. “Brian sent me purchase orders for the past year from the electronics company where Jason Beeman worked. No hits there. But then I was thinking about Jeremy Olmstead. He was murdered five years after that night in the ER. *Five years*. That’s a long time to wait. So I looked up Beeman’s employment history. His previous job was in tech support for a different company; they do home stereo systems too, plus soundproofing. They wouldn’t disclose their customers without a warrant, so I called them pretending I needed insulation for my home office. Said I wanted the same treatment they’d done for a friend of mine, and lo and behold, they found him in their records.”

“You asked for Dr. Lecter by name,” Will says.

Beverly puts a shaky hand over her forehead. “Yeah,” she says, as if not quite believing it herself. “I did.”

“Why did you ask for him by name?”

“I don’t *know*,” she hisses. “He’s connected to at least five of the victims, isn’t he? The connections are tenuous, but they’re there. None of this is enough for a warrant. It’s flimsy, completely circumstantial. Could be a coincidence.”

“Could be,” Will drawls.

“I’m not saying I believe you!” Beverly’s voice is sharp, defensive. “But I believe—” she trails off, glassy eyed. “I believe he’s *shady.* I’ve always thought he was shady. He’s obviously not a very good psychiatrist, because look what happened to you. And he keeps coming to see you, even though almost everyone who knows you has begged him to stop. He’d done everything he can to get on this investigation. He’s very tight with Jack. They have little tête-à-têtes in Jack’s office almost every day.”

“He has wormed his way in there real good,” Will says, nodding.

“Jack isn’t going to investigate him. He’ll dismiss this—all this—in a heartbeat.”

“I know.”

Silence.

“I’m not saying I believe you,” Beverly says again, more vehement this time.

“Uh. Then what are you saying?”

She slaps the pile of paperwork. “I’m saying that there’s *something* here! Something worth following up on.”

“I agree.”

“He's connected to five of the victims, Will. Five of fifteen.”

“He’s connected to all of them,” Will says. “The links are there for us to find.”

“Us?”

“You and me.”

She covers her face with her hands. “I’m gonna lose my job.”

Will lets out a morbid chuckle. “We don’t catch him, Bev, and I’m gonna lose a lot more than that.”

She looks up, a plain gaze, penetrating. She is seeing him anew. “If he’s the Ripper…” she says. “And that’s a big ‘if’…then that means he knows how the FBI works. How our investigations work. He knows something about forensics, he knows how to plant evidence. He’s done it before with Miriam’s hair and fingerprints. And he knows how you work. He knows you better than anyone.”

Will says nothing. He senses the fragility of her web of connections and is afraid that if he says anything, the web will collapse into its constituent wisps and murmurs.

“He could have known you were sick,” she says.

Now he holds up one finger, asking her to wait. He pulls a photograph off his evidence wall. She stands up, takes it from him through the bars. It’s Cassie Boyle, impaled on antlers.

“Body on display,” he whispers. “Theatrical. Humiliating. Lungs removed with surgical precision. If you hadn’t been working the Hobbs case, then who would you have assumed had murdered this girl?”

Beverly lets out a long sigh.

“I didn’t see it at the time,” Will says. “But Bev, look at it. *Look at it*. This is him announcing himself. He was saying hello.”

Beverly crosses her arms tightly across herself. It looks like a poor substitute for a hug. She says, in a strangled voice: “Ok.”

“Ok, what?”

“Ok!” she yelps, shoulders jumping. “I believe you!”

For a second he is too spellbound to move. The world is remade. And oh, he likes this new version so much better.

“Say it again,” he whispers, stepping right up to the bars.

She, too, takes a step towards the bars. There is now between them more metal than air.

Beverly clears her throat. “I. Believe. You.”

“One more time.”

Which makes her gag on a bout of nervous laughter. “Seriously, Will. Don’t press your luck.”

Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

Love is in the air.

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the delay! At least I left you in a nice place--no horrible cliffhanger or anything. Which means I better not take three weeks to post the chapter after this one! Heh heh heh.

It takes him almost two hours to bring Beverly up to speed. From Cassie Boyle to Abigail, Will reconstructs the last six months of his life and Hannibal's increasingly prominent part in it, filling in the blanks that are his blackout spells, weaving Hannibal's movements around his own, a hidden choreography of machinations and lies. Will feels a perverse pleasure in recounting everything to Bev. At first she asks questions, tries to get the whole thing straight, but she lapses into a confounded silence as the story goes on. By the time Will reaches Abigail's ear, Beverly is drooping in her chair, elbows on her knees, hair swaying as she rolls her neck.

He finishes. Waits for her to speak. Keeps waiting.

"Um," he says. "It'd be great if you could... say something now."

She doesn't look up.

He nods in fear. "Now that you've heard everything, you believe me less."

When she looks at him, her face is blank, shell-shocked. "I don't believe you less. It's just a lot to wrap my head around."

"I get that," he says quickly. He has had months to come to terms with his own story, wild leaps and all, but some of it is hard for even him to process.

"It's just," says Beverly. "I just. Don't really understand. *Why*. I guess."

"Why what?"

“Why anything! Why anyone would do any of this!” She cradles her forehead as if it’s about to burst. “I mean, of course, it makes sense for Lecter to frame you for the murders. You were out of it and losing time, you were the perfect fall guy—sorry. But then why send you after Tobias Budge? If Budge had killed you, then no more fall guy for Lecter. And if he really murdered Cassie Boyle to help you find Garret Jacob Hobbs, then why give Hobbs advance warning you were on to him? It’s like he can’t make up his mind whether he’s trying to help you out or put you in the ground! And then there’s the whole issue of why he’s still hanging around you now. You’d think he’d want to get the hell out of Dodge, especially once you wised up and realized he was responsible for setting you up. You say he’s an intelligent psychopath, Will—but this guy, he doesn’t seem to operate by the rules of human logic. I mean, does he *want* to get caught?”

“No,” says Will. “He’s spent a lot of time picturing it: the media circus of a trial, the boredom and humiliation that comes with incarceration. He knows it’s not for him. But he is willing to risk that outcome, he’s willing to risk all outcomes, if it gets him what he wants.”

Her eyebrows are raised. “Which is?”

He shrugs. “There is no one thing. That’s what makes him so hard to profile; he never does anything for just one reason. He has a thousand reasons for doing what he does, which makes it look like he has no reason at all. There is no master plan, Bev. He doesn’t know where this is going any more than I do. He makes his decisions one after the other, weighing all the options every time. Rolling with the punches. As the game changes, he adapts. He evolves. He won’t get locked into any pattern of behavior, he knows better than that.”

“Then how do we catch him?” she asks, in a low voice.

He answers immediately, with total confidence. “By thinking like him. Playing loose, the same way he does. The only problem is…”

“What?” Her voice rises. “What’s the problem?”

Will gathers himself. It takes courage, after being left alone for so long, to share his biggest fears with another human being. He says:

“Me thinking like him, that’s one of the things he wants… and he wants it bad.”

Beverly, brazen and honest, with her keen scientific mind and limited patience for the inexplicable, simply stares at him. It is clear he has ventured into terrain she is ill equipped to explore alongside him.

“Ok,” she says, though clearly she isn’t. “I can’t say I get that, but here’s what I do get.” She claps her hands together, signaling her return to a safer subject. “We need to build a case against Lecter, and it can’t be circumstantial. We need hard evidence. DNA.”

“He doesn’t leave any DNA at his crime scenes.”

“But he takes it with him, doesn’t he? He takes trophies. The organs, probably other tissues samples, too.”

“I don’t know what he’s doing with the organs,” Will says quietly, unwinding the endless scroll of options in his mind. “But yes, they’re definitely important to him. He preserves them. He *respects* them, far more than the bodies he takes them from.”

“So he has the organs stashed away in jars of formaldehyde or something. This guy is a meticulous hoarder; I’ve seen evidence of that myself. All those journals and receipts he keeps. He’s a really organized pack rat. He must’ve stored samples from Cassie Boyle and Marissa Schuur for months so eventually he could make those fishing lures for you. Odds are, he’s sitting on a treasure trove of evidence that could put him away for centuries. We just have to find the X that marks the spot.”

Will nods, rubbing at the bridge of his nose. He proceeds carefully. “You realize… that when you say ‘we’… what it’s really gonna mean is *you*?”

By the look on Beverly’s face he knows she is well aware of this eventuality. “Just tell me where to look,” she says.

He smiles at her in dazed appreciation. “You know he’s dangerous, right?”

She rolls her eyes. “He has killed at least twenty people, Will. I think I know what I’m dealing with here.”

“You don’t,” he says firmly, and her face falls. “Sorry,” he gulps, “but you can’t know. Hannibal Lecter isn’t your textbook psychopath. There is no profile for him, no rubric. He’s like no type you’ve ever dealt with. If he finds out you’re helping me—and he will find out, it’s a given—then he will neutralize you.”

“Just say what you mean.” Her face is grave. “He’s gonna try to kill me.”

“*No*.” Will’s voice climbs higher with frustration. “See, you don’t understand him! That *isn’t* what I mean. Of course he could kill you, but that doesn’t prove he’s going to. If he murders an agent involved in his own investigation, then he exposes himself. No. He won’t risk it. He’ll find other ways of stopping you. Maybe he’ll set things up so you can’t see me any more. Or he’ll have Jack pull you off the Ripper case. If you make too much trouble for Dr. Lecter, he’ll find a way to damage your credibility, lose you your job. I don’t know exactly what he’ll do, but one thing’s for certain.”

He leans forward until his face is almost against the bars, his voice shivery with dread.

“Beverly, he’s gonna *talk* to you. He’ll tell you I’m sick, that I’m a liar who’s taking advantage of you, that it’s in your best interests not to believe a word of what I say. He’ll try to get close to you if he can. He’ll cozy up, disarm you by seeming to know a lot about you. He’ll be friendly, sympathetic, understanding. You have to be ready. Put up walls that don’t look like walls, defend yourself without tipping him off that you’re defending yourself. You think you can do that?”

She gives a half-hearted shrug. “Yeah. Sure.”

“Bev—”

She waves both hands to silence him. “Will, you know I have no idea what I’m getting into here, so I’m not gonna pretend like I do. Right now I feel as though I’m doggy paddling in the middle of the Mariana Trench, but I can handle myself. You’ve got enough to worry about without worrying about me. Ok?”

He examines her, from head to toe. He thinks she looks shaky, but steadfast.

“Ok,” he says.

“What about this stuff?” She lifts the pile of forms in her lap, the only incriminating evidence they have against Hannibal. “Jack sent us looking through those medical records. What do we tell him we found?”

Will merely cocks his head.

She sighs. Drops the forms. “You want me to hide evidence from Jack.”

“I want you to hide what you know from Hannibal Lecter.”

“You’re obstructing the Ripper investigation,” she says, aghast.

“Dr. Lecter is the one obstructing it,” Will says. “Beverly, *this* is the Ripper investigation. You and me and what we know. The other investigation, Jack’s investigation—it’s a joke. They don’t have the scent and they never will. Dr. Lecter will make sure they’re just chasing their tails.”

“Jack is desperate to catch the Ripper,” Beverly says. “You know that. It’s all he cares about right now. I can’t take that away from him.”

“You have no choice.”

Her eyes go wide. “Of course I do! Both of us have a choice here, Will. Always. So I have to insist, when we get what we need to dig Lecter’s grave, we take it back to Jack. He’s our first stop. I want it to be Jack who makes the arrest.”

Will shakes his head. Beverly and her incorruptible loyalty to Jack; usually he respects it, but right now he considers it a massive inconvenience.

“He’s too close to Lecter, you said so yourself. He won’t believe us. It’s possible he may never believe us, no matter what hard evidence we throw at him. I’m sorry, Bev, but we have to go over Jack’s head on this. When the time comes, we show what we have to Petersen, to the Attorney General, to state police and local PD even. Hell, peddle it to Freddie Lounds for all I care. Anyone but Jack.”

“No,” Beverly says, flatly. “Out of the question. I’ll hide evidence for you, Will. I’ll lie through my teeth to everyone I know. I’ll wade through the dumpsters behind Hannibal Lecter’s house. But I won’t give Jack the shaft. That’s where I draw the line. We’re just going to have to build a case so solid that even Jack will admit it’s watertight.”

Will rubs his face. He knows beggars can't be choosers. He has to accept the help he's given, no matter what stringent conditions it comes under.

"So?" she prods him. "We do things my way or what?"

Finally he nods. "Your way," he mutters.

He doesn't tell Beverly that her way is probably going to involve catching Hannibal Lecter red fucking handed.

The pendulum swings. He is Hannibal Lecter, and he is walking through rose bushes, stalks swaying in the wake of his gardening boots. The flowers are in full bloom, and even at midnight some of them are so bright they appear almost phosphorescent. He passes blossoms white, downy, tender purple and sunset-streaked. He ducks under aromatic climbers, avoiding both the thorny and the delicate. The thick grass muffles the sounds of the dolly cart he drags behind him. He approaches the bower, the proscenium arch he has selected to frame his work.

He is sated and sedate, having already taken his enjoyment in a less exposed locale. Alexander Freskin and Jacqueline Calvina died on the way to the municipal gardens; he timed his incisions to make sure of this. Now what rolls behind him on the dolly is only meat, and he knows all there is to know about the handling of meat. This meat he wants just fresh enough to manipulate before rigor mortis sets in.

He moves with deliberation, an almost balletic level of grace. He has rehearsed this in his mind, has approached the rose bower from every available angle at all hours of the day. He has chosen this path of action and this moment in which to act. Upon review he is pleased with his choices, and he becomes even more pleased as he unpacks his tools and begins the assembly.

With pleasure comes control. His limbs sing with power. For him, joy and command have always complemented one another. He works his shears, trades out his chisel for his smaller-sized gouge, wipes some congealed fluid from his heavy-duty gardener's gloves. The summer night feels good on the back of his neck and the air is sweet with just a trace of rot. He is glad he decided to do the drilling while Mr. Freskin and Miss Calvina were still alive; it saves him time and effort now. Breaking the ribs in advance was also a canny thought as it has rendered the torsos extra malleable. He entertains himself while he works by switching back and forth between thinking of his material as inanimate and animate. They are objects now, clay he can mold into the shape of his choosing. But they were formerly human beings, creatures capable in life of both wit and splendor, who squandered their inborn potential on trifles, on the most banal and petty of concerns. But he can help them rediscover their greatness in death.

The work approaches completion. His pleasure mounts. There is no more powerful feeling than the recognition that one's handiwork bears some small resemblance to the vision in one's mind. He realizes, as he laces rose stems through the hole in Mr. Freskin's sternum, that he is smiling with all his teeth. He isn't often driven to this expression of feeling, and he

makes a note of it for future consideration. He classifies this as euphoria, he files it away as sublime. Removing a smear of gore from his goggles, he could almost laugh. Almost.

He takes a step back, appreciates his work as an outside observer might. As a parks employee on his morning rounds, who has just noticed the broken lock on the garden gate and ventures inside not knowing what's in store. He sees a couple embracing on the bench underneath the rose bower, their bodies wound together like braided silk. For a moment he believes that there are trespassers in his garden, and that these trespassers are alive. Who could blame the parks employee for making this mistake, for the lovers do appear awake and aware. Her neck strains as she tilts into the kiss. His arms clutch her in a literal death grip, fingers individually tensed. Neither of their faces can be seen; the lovers have swallowed each other up. Their clothes are only a little bloodstained, but slicks of red emerge from the holes in their chests and arms. Through these cavities he has threaded great bunches of red roses, velvety evocations of blood spray. Very nice. Dramatic, if he says so himself.

He leaves the hypothetical parks employee behind, and instead imagines seeing his lovers through the eyes of someone else, someone whose opinion matters very much to him. His perception revolves, refocuses. The mirror confronts the mirror with a collision of infinities. Sight within sight within sight. The lovers come alive again and embrace over and over and overandoverandover—*with compliments from the chef, Will*.

The pendulum stops.

Will feels as though his heart, too, has stopped. He presses his hand to it, feels it knocking against the bars of his ribs. He realizes his other hand is crushing the photograph, a crumpled glossy ball under his fingers. Hastily he smoothes it out. Now there are creases bisecting the lovers' entwined bodies. He feels a spike of annoyance at this marring of his work.

Not his work.

He closes his eyes, breathes heavily through his nose. With effort Will shakes off the heavy mantle that is Hannibal's perspective, and tries to slip back into the ill-fitting confines of his own. Jack sees that he is stirring and walks towards the bars, summoning the BAU team back over. They wait for Will to break the silence.

"He took their hearts," he says. It isn't a question.

But Price shakes his head. "He only took Alex Freskin's heart. He left Jacqueline Calvina's in her chest."

"The Ripper must have thought she was a real heartbreaker," says Zeller.

"No hearts were broken here," Beverly says. "Organ removal was impeccable as always. The Ripper also took Freskin's kidney and Calvina's spleen, pancreas, and thymus."

"You think there's some significance with leaving the woman's heart?" Jack asks Will.

"Everything with the Ripper is significant," Will says, rubbing the clammy sweat from his brow. "This is his statement, and every part of it can speak."

“What is it saying?”

“Happy Valentines Day?” guesses Price.

“It’s August,” Zeller reminds him.

“Then somebody should get the Ripper a calendar,” Price says.

They stop their chatter at a look from Jack.

“The Ripper doesn’t think we can catch him. This is,”—Will swallows his bile—“an escalation.”

Jack is standing in profile with most of his face in shadow. Will can’t really see his expression, but the other man’s exhaustion is like a shroud hanging over him.

“You think he’s taking this to a new level?” Jack asks, gravel-voiced.

“Don’t you?” Will says. “He killed two at once. Instead of displaying the victims at the kill spot, he transported them to a worthier site. He built a wooden frame around the bodies to keep them upright. It must have taken him all night.”

Price chimes in. “He drilled those holes in their chests and biceps while both victims were still alive. When he arrived at the garden, he lined up the holes so he could tie the bodies together with the roses. It’s incredible that he did all of it in advance, off site, and everything still matched up perfectly and allowed for such… natural positioning.”

“Looks a lot like Rodin’s The Kiss,” Zeller says, showing them a photo of a marble sculpture on his iPad. And then, miffed by their startled expressions: “What? Can’t I know about art?”

“The roses the Ripper used aren’t a species that grows in the rose garden,” Beverly says. “He brought them with him. It’s a Hybrid Tea strain, if anyone’s interested. Rose breeders call it Deep Secret.”

“Deep Secret,” Jack mutters with a sigh.

“This isn’t a crime scene,” Will says to him. “It’s an installation. A *happening*. The confidence at work here is staggering.”

“The more he kills, the more ambitious he gets,” Zeller says. “Pretty standard for a serial killer.”

“Nothing about this is standard,” Beverly says quietly.

“What I want to know is whether this is it,” Jack says. “The Ripper has already killed three this cycle. Is he about to close the window?”

“I can’t be sure,” Will says truthfully. “But he killed four last time, Jack. Escalation implies he’s building up to something. And that something probably isn’t silence.” He catches Beverly’s eye as he says: “I think the Ripper’s just getting started.”

“Were you holding anything back?” she asks him afterward. Beverly has stayed behind on the pretense of tacos, but really they’re talking shop.

Will chews his steak taco as he thinks. Finally he shakes his head. “Nothing material.”

“Killing two at once, that’s a pretty massive change in his M.O. You’ve gotta have some theory on why he did it.”

Will shrugs. He wonders when Beverly will finally give up on asking him *why*.

“Have you considered that the explanation could be you?” she says, putting down her fish taco.

“Could be me what?”

“Lecter is showing off for you. Without realizing it, you might be egging him on.”

He feels a surge of distaste. “You think I encouraged him to do this?”

“I’m not saying you’re doing it deliberately. But *yeah*. He knows you’re investigating him. Don’t you do better work when you know you have someone looking over your shoulder?”

“I am not the only member of his audience,” Will grumbles. “He has the whole Behavioral Sciences division after him. There’s major news coverage. TattleCrime.com. He always has people watching.”

He feels under attack, precisely because he knows Beverly is right. But he can’t admit to that. Having someone in his confidence is all he has ever wanted, but now that he finally has it, he finds that it is often a very uncomfortable experience. There are things he’d rather Beverly not know.

She looks at the Ripper side of Will’s evidence wall, where he has taped a photo of the two corpses the team has dubbed ‘The Lovers’. “I can’t do what you do,” she says, “but even I can tell that this feels different from his other murders. This feels *personal*.”

Will senses her eyes on him, but he can’t meet them. His face feels hot. “You’re right,” he says. “It is personal. But it isn’t about me.”

“If not you, then who?”

He pokes at the remains of his taco. Beverly doesn’t know about Alana, and Will can’t bring himself to share with her the gory details. ‘The Lovers’ is Hannibal’s love song, Will is certain about that. Through this gruesome display of artistry, Hannibal is exploring his own capacity for romance. He left Jacqueline Calvina’s heart where he found it. He could have destroyed it utterly, but chose not to. There is real emotion in his choice. An affection just one shade darker than devotion. Will isn’t sure whether he feels relieved or repelled by the notion that what Hannibal feels for Alana is real.

Beverly is frowning at him. She doesn't enjoy being coddled or lied to, but she'll have to learn to live with both. He and she may be partners now, but Will is incapable of full disclosure.

She sighs and pokes dejectedly at a sprig of cilantro, a sign that she has given up the fight. "I may have found something," she says. She slides out a yellow legal pad. "I was thinking about the way Lecter times his crimes. A short window, followed by long periods of inactivity. Those periods can last anywhere from four months, which is the length of his most recent, to twenty-six months, which was the length of the break he took after killing Miriam Lass. That's a lot of variation. Makes you wonder if he's killing when he gets the opportunity, or when he gets the urge."

Will shrugs, wipes sour cream from the corner of his mouth. "Little of both?"

"Maybe. But here's the thing. You probably know that Lecter likes throwing dinner parties. Big black tie affairs: twelve to fifteen guests, courses numbering in the double digits, hors d'oeuvres, wine pairings, live music, the works."

Will nods. "He invited me once."

"Did you *go*?" She looks so surprised he almost laughs.

"What do you think?" He smirks. "Not exactly my scene. I dropped in on him beforehand, and I saw he had hired sous chefs to help him prepare the food. It took all the self-control I could muster not to run away screaming. But what does this have to do with the murders?"

"I'll get to that in a sec. Esmeralda Vance, she's big on the Baltimore social scene and she loves tweeting about the fancy events she attends. She went to the last four of Lecter's dinner parties, and she tweeted about them. And guess what? The dates of her tweets match up with the dates of the last four Ripper cycles. Every time Lecter finishes a cycle, he throws a party."

He motions for her to pass him the legal pad. He looks at the dates she has noted down and sees that she is exactly right. "Cause for celebration," he mutters.

"It's more than that," she says with relish. "Think about it. It's a great cover. It takes a lot of work to organize an event like that. It requires Lecter to be out a lot, always on the move. He has to buy things, hire personnel, get his place ready for the big day. Lots of people to meet, lots of appointments to keep, lots of phone calls: ready alibis for every hour of every day. He'd have workmen coming in and out of his home, which gives him access to a van, professional cleaning supplies, moving materials. He gets what he needs for his crimes, and nobody notices a thing because all it looks like he's doing is party planning."

"It's just like him, to hide his crimes behind a veneer of visibility." Will looks at her in wonder. "This is great work, Bev."

"It's still circumstantial," she says modestly. "But at least we're getting closer."

"The real question is whether he's planning a party *now*. We have to find out what services he's using, talk to them, see if they've noticed anything out of the—"

Beverly waves a hand to shut him up. The orderlies are opening the gate at the end of the corridor. Beverly immediately hides the legal pad, which gives Will a pretty good idea of who the new arrival must be. They both return to munching what's left of their tacos. Discreet footsteps as Hannibal approaches. They both look up at him—he is standing with his coat folded over his arm, and since Beverly and Will are sitting on the floor, he appears to them almost monolithic.

"I apologize for interrupting," Hannibal says. "Please don't stop on my account. Finish your meal."

Beverly, who has tensed to her knees, slowly sits back down.

Despite his words, Hannibal doesn't leave them to it. Instead he looks at Will. "If you felt the hospital food inadequate, you might have told me. I would gladly prepare you something myself."

"I don't want to inconvenience you," Will says acidly, with his mouth full. "I know you're a busy man."

"I am never too busy to cook for you."

Will swallows his mouthful of steak and turns to Beverly, who is watching him with eyes slightly larger than normal. "Dr. Lecter prides himself on his cooking," he says to her, as if she doesn't know. "It's a hobby of his." He stabs a look back at Hannibal. "One of many."

Beverly composes herself, and when she turns to Hannibal her voice is easy, casual. "Jack raves about your food. Says it's better than what you get in a fine restaurant."

"Jack is very kind," Hannibal says. He is looking at Beverly closely, a clinical examination. "If you are curious about my cooking, Agent Katz, you are welcome at my table any time you like."

"Thanks for the invitation," she says, wiping her hands on a napkin. "But I think it'd be lost on me. Fine dining isn't really my thing. I prefer my food fast and wrapped in branded paper. Ask Will."

"Beverly's been nice enough to do deliveries for me," Will says. "For which I'm very grateful."

Hannibal looks his way again, and in the black vacuum of his gaze Will can't tell what he's thinking, what he may suspect.

Beverly throws away the taco wrappings and is about to climb to her feet when Hannibal extends one hand to her, all chivalry. She takes it, and he helps her upright.

"Thanks," she says.

"You shouldn't sell yourself short," Hannibal tells her. "I suspect you have more of a taste for the finer things than you may yourself believe. If your palate lacks sophistication, then we must do all we can to expand its range."

Beverly looks only a little taken aback. “Well,” she says. “You can try to educate me, if you really want to. But I have to warn you. You may be biting off more than you can chew.”

She reaches for her bag, slings it with ease over one shoulder. “See you, Will.” She turns back to Hannibal. “Oh, and Dr. Lecter, before I forget. You need to make an appointment to come down to the lab so we can take some samples.”

“Samples?” Hannibal asks her, politely. “From me?”

“It’s nothing too invasive, I just need a cheek swab. And Jimmy will fingerprint you. Elimination prints. Since you’re coming to crime scenes now, we need your information on file so that if you happen to leave a hair or a print behind you, we don’t mistake it for a lead on the Ripper.”

“You believe I will contaminate your crime scenes, Agent Katz?”

“Not consciously,” she says with a smile. “But even the most careful person can leave traces of himself behind. Swing by the lab tomorrow at whatever time works best for you, ok?”

“With pleasure,” says Hannibal. “I will call ahead.”

“Great. See you when I see you.” Beverly glances at Will for only the briefest of moments, and then she walks away, hands in the pockets of her bomber jacket, looking nonchalant.

Hannibal and Will both watch her go. “She is a little uncouth,” Hannibal says, “but she has spirit.”

“She isn’t afraid to say what she thinks,” Will says, “that’s for sure.”

“And you appreciate that? Having someone in your life who speaks to you honestly?”

“I do.” Will lets a taunt into his eyes, but his tone is polite.

“I am surprised,” Hannibal says, though he doesn’t sound it. “I would think that for a man in your position, the plain truth—as Agent Katz sees it—would be an unwelcome companion.”

“I don’t like liars. I never have. I see through them.”

Hannibal makes a gentle noise of agreement. “So do I.”

For a moment they just stare at each other, their faces quite opaque. Two shuttered windows.

Will leans against the bars, examining Hannibal. “You’re looking tired. You pull an all-nighter?”

Hannibal lets him look. “My practice keeps me very busy.”

“Plus you’re consulting on the Ripper case. That must take up a lot of your time.”

“I am happy to make myself useful to Jack,” Hannibal says, as he sits on a folding chair. “I know what kind of strain the Ripper puts him under.”

“You do indeed,” Will says. “Jack asked me whether ‘The Lovers’ is the Ripper’s way of closing the window with a bang, or whether he still has more ripping to do.”

“What did you tell him?” Hannibal asks.

“I told him to expect another body. Was I right?”

Hannibal performs his version of a shrug.

Will sighs. “Doctor, I’m just asking for your opinion as a consultant on this case. Do you agree with my assessment or not?”

Hannibal chooses his words more carefully than usual. “Jack asked me the same question he asked you, and my answer was not dissimilar to yours. What did you think of ‘The Lovers’, Will? What is your, ah, professional assessment?”

Will restrains himself from rolling his eyes at Hannibal’s blatant fishing for compliments.

“I think it was perverse,” he says firmly. “And arrogant. The Ripper’s reach is exceeding his grasp. He is striving for something meaningful, but there’s no meaning in his murders. It’s just empty posturing. Play-acting, just like everything the Ripper does. He thinks he’s saying something about love, but he is just whistling into the wind.”

Will is lying through his smirk, telling Hannibal everything Hannibal doesn’t want to hear. He watches with detached amusement as Hannibal’s annoyance takes root and grows.

“You think the Ripper can’t feel love?” Hannibal asks quietly.

This time Will answers truthfully. “He feels something. It isn’t love.”

“And you are an expert on what love is, and what it is not?”

“I’m an expert on the Ripper.”

Hannibal’s eyes are diamond hard. “I think you might be whistling into the wind yourself, Will. You comprehend too much, and not enough. You think the Ripper can’t understand love because of his fascination with death, but the reverse is true. Death and love walk together hand in hand like the most faithful of intimates. Anyone with an appreciation for the former must have a deep comprehension of the latter. And if you are afraid of death, it stands to reason you must be afraid of love.”

“You’re saying I’m afraid of love?” Will asks, sneering.

“Deathly afraid,” says Hannibal. “You are afraid of the trust that comes with love. You are afraid of losing that trust. You are afraid of losing what you love.”

Will is shaking. “And what about you, Dr. Lecter? You afraid of losing what you love?”

Hannibal's expression is inscrutable. "I understand that loss is inevitable. I am prepared for it, whenever it may come."

"You're prepared for it," Will hisses, "because what you love you're never gonna lose. The only thing you love is yourself. Haven't you noticed that everything you covet is just a pale reflection of *you*? A hall of mirrors. You want to know why you're lonely, Dr. Lecter? It's because reflections make for poor companions."

Hannibal takes a very slow breath through his nose. There is a subsonic rumble in that breath, the stirring of a volcano on the boil.

"They do today," he says quietly, as he stands up and collects his coat. His gestures are very controlled, very deliberate; Will knows he is almost on the point of violence. He shrinks away on instinct as Hannibal steps to the bars.

"You spend a great deal of your time worrying about others, Will. Perhaps you ought to worry more about yourself." He turns to go. "Sleep well."

Will doesn't sleep well. His dreams are all tangled together, a confused profusion of images. A prison guard with an automatic rifle stands over him as he sleeps. Red roses bloom on the antlers of the raven-feathered stag. Alana reflected in a broken mirror. Dr. Chilton laying silver coins over Will's closed eyes. Beverly dealing out playing cards, and every card is a heart. Abigail cutting off her own ear with a hunting knife. Jack digging a grave on an empty beach.

He wakes up, his head pounding in time to his heart. He is groggy and disoriented, and it takes him a long time to feel fully alert. He has a funny feeling like all the furniture in his cell has been moved around while he was asleep. But that is impossible; it's all bolted down.

Then he sees. On the wall above his bed—the evidence wall for the copycat, not the Ripper—there is a new addition. It has been taped on top of the other photographs, as if it trumps them in importance. It is not a photograph, but a drawing, done with charcoal on a sheet of thick yellow paper. Delicate lines delineate the naked form of a woman lying in bed, the sheets rippled around her ankles as if she has just kicked them off. Her expression is private, contemplative, fond. Will can tell the drawing was made with great affection and understanding of its subject. The subject is unmistakably Alana.

The drawing has no signature. It doesn't need one.

He stares at it. He doesn't take it down. It's hanging just above where his head was lying moments before, when he was so uneasily asleep.

Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

Wakey, wakey.

When Barney comes with breakfast, he tells Will, “You got a visitor today.”

Will raises his eyebrows. He gets lots of visitors, and Barney doesn’t usually feel the need to warn him in advance.

“Who is it?”

Barney shrugs. “All Dr. Chilton would tell me is that it’s a psychiatric specialist who’s interested in your case.”

“Huh. Could mean a lot of people.” Will stabs his fork half-heartedly at the yellow mash that is supposed to be eggs.

“Don’t think this is one of your regulars, though,” says Barney, as he locks the cell door.

Barney turns out to be right. Two hours after breakfast, Will hears the corridor gate drawing back and the soft rasp of high heels on concrete. The other inmates, who a moment ago were talking and shifting excitedly at the visitor’s arrival, are suddenly silent and still. Reverent. As if they have fallen under a spell.

The woman who appears beyond the bars of Will’s cell looks very out of place in this oppressive institution. Despite being indoors, she wears large framed sunglasses and a patterned silk scarf knotted over her sleek blonde hair. She’s like a 1940’s movie star who has just stepped out of a convertible. She talks like one, too.

“Good morning, Mr. Graham.”

Barney, who is trailing her and looking gobsmacked, chivalrously unfolds a chair while trying not to stare too openly. The woman has the eerie composure of a marble sculpture; there is something mesmeric, and fragile, in the way she nods at him and takes the seat.

“Thank you,” she says. “Leave us, please.”

Barney does as he is told, throwing Will a look of sly congratulations on his way out.

The woman removes her sunglasses. She has cold blue eyes that seem to stare both into Will and past him. They are beautiful and unnerving, just like the rest of her.

“My name is Dr. Bedelia du Maurier. I am happy to finally have an opportunity to meet with you.”

Dr. du Maurier unties the silk scarf and, like magic, her hair falls over one shoulder in a single shining coil.

Will puts his glasses on. “You’re a psychiatrist?” he asks.

“I used to be. I retired several years ago.”

“Then why are you visiting me?”

The blunt question makes her smile coolly. “I am not here in an official capacity. If you were to ask Frederick Chilton about my visit, he will tell you that I was not here at all. A necessary precaution.”

Will looks at her, and has no trouble imagining what kind of power she might hold over a creature like Chilton.

“What do you want?” he asks, impolitely. Something about her rings familiar to him, and that familiarity fills him with a prickling fear.

“To see you for myself.” And to illustrate her point, her eyes slide over him from head to foot. He watches her do it and knows exactly what she sees: an unkempt man in a prison jumpsuit with chewed-up fingernails and hollow cheeks, his skin with the blue-tinged pallor that comes from six months without the sun. To Dr. du Maurier, he looks like a man who belongs in this cell.

“I’ve heard a great deal about you,” she says. “I’m not sure I understand the fuss. You seem, to all intents and purposes, *ordinary*.”

She says it like a slur. He raises his eyebrows, wondering what exactly he has done to offend this woman.

“Is that why you’re here?” he asks. “To gauge exactly how ordinary I am?”

“In part. But the truth is that I am here because we have a”—she pauses, minutely—“friend in common.”

The pause is what gives her away. “Hannibal Lecter,” Will says immediately.

“Yes.” Her voice cracks on the word like she has grown suddenly ancient.

“You’re his psychiatrist.”

She looks a little stunned. Not so ordinary after all.

“He mentioned you once,” he explains.

“And he has mentioned you.” A bite of amusement in her voice. “More than once.”

“You said you were retired.”

“I am. He is my only patient.”

“He doesn’t like to share.”

“No.” A sliver of a smile from du Maurier. “He does not.”

And she relaxes a little. Will has proven himself, and now she feels safe opening herself up to him, unlocking the heavy doors that lie between her and what she sees as the hostile outer world. Will can’t see much inside her yet, just a private amusement in which she isn’t quite allowing him to partake.

“I tried referring him to other psychiatrists,” she says. “I explained why I needed to suspend my practice, but he wouldn’t listen. He was, and still remains, completely intractable. Once Hannibal Lecter is in your life, it is impossible to make him leave.”

Will nods. “He takes responsibility from you. For you. For your life and all your choices. He takes it whether you want him to have it or not. And once he has it, he feels it would be remiss of him to give it back.”

“Yes,” says Dr. du Maurier, quietly.

They look at each other in silent appreciation. It’s the Hannibal Lecter support group neither of them asked to join.

“You understand him,” she says. “That much is clear.”

“I’ve made it high priority,” Will says.

She tilts her head, considering him. “And you think that’s wise?”

He smiles. “No.” And then he says, “You understand him, too.”

Immediately she shakes her head. “I know less than you do. And I would prefer to keep it that way. I am resigned to his presence in my life. I know I play a role in maintaining his happiness. I provide him with an outlet, and it would be… reckless to deprive him of the outlet I provide.”

Dr. du Maurier always projects an air of carefully maintained fragility, but she doesn’t show any fear. She seems protective not of herself, but of *Hannibal.* When she speaks of him, she sounds almost fond. It’s eyebrow raising, to say the least.

“What role do you play for him, exactly?” Will asks.

She takes a long time to answer. “You could call me… his witness.” Her mouth quirks. “The question is, what role do you play?”

“Sometimes I think I’m his whipping post. He’d probably tell you I’m his mirror. Maybe he already has.”

She tilts her head. “You are not his mirror.”

He stares at her. He can’t tell what she’s thinking.

“Not exclusively his mirror, anyway,” she says. “Hannibal looks for his reflection in everyone he meets. In that way he might be mistaken for a narcissist. He doesn’t consider you his mirror, Will. Maybe he only intends for you to think of yourself as one.” She bows her head solicitously. “I hope you don’t mind that I called you Will.”

“It’s fine,” he says, as etiquette couldn’t be further from his mind. “What’s my role, if not a mirror?”

She shifts, suddenly uncomfortable. “I couldn’t tell you. Something else. Hannibal himself may not know. Perhaps that is why he is so obsessed with you. You have him all caught up, Will. You must know that. From the moment he met you, he has been fascinated with you, and over time that fascination has metastasized into a full-blown infatuation. You are his first and last thought of every day. I have told him again and again that he should stop seeing you. That if he wishes to maintain his reputation and the lifestyle to which he has grown accustomed, he should play no further part in your recovery, or in your life. He claims he can sever the tie whenever he likes… but I am beginning to doubt that pledge. He won’t be separated from you. He will do everything in his power to prevent that from happening. So I have no other recourse but to come and speak with you myself.”

She looks down at her hands, gathering herself. “I wish for you to know that I don’t undertake this venture lightly. This is the first time I have left my home in almost three years.”

Will raises his eyebrows, entreating her to go on, but inside he is steeling himself.

She crosses her legs and leans toward him. “You are standing blindfolded on the edge of a precipice. The least you can do is take the blindfold off. I can say, from experience, that there is nothing more dangerous to your health than being the object of Hannibal Lecter’s infatuation.”

“I know,” Will says, quietly. He understands what Dr. du Maurier might be sacrificing in coming to see him, and he feels a pang in having to reject her outright. “But I can handle it. I have to. I won’t have any better luck than you, getting rid of him. He just won’t go.”

Her eyes brighten. “You know him better than I did then. You know which parts of yourself command his interest. You must shut those parts down. Make yourself less interesting to him.”

Will smiles sadly. “I couldn’t do that even if I wanted to.”

“You don’t want to?” she asks, a touch of incredulity coloring her voice.

“What I am, Dr. du Maurier, I can’t change.”

Her eyes leave his face for the first time, and drift across the gory surface of his cell walls. “Your investigation interests him, too. You might change that. If you were to stop pursuing him, he would see that as a very large discouragement.”

Will expected her to make this suggestion. “You want him to run free?”

Her gaze returns to him, sharp as a dagger. “He will run free whether I want him to or not.”

“I can catch him.” Will leans forward. “You want to know what role I play for him? Maybe I’m his downfall.”

She smiles in earnest now. It is not a friendly smile. There is something bloodthirsty in its curve.

“They call you delusional. And you must be, if you think catching Hannibal Lecter is not only possible, but that, in catching him, all your problems will miraculously disappear. Some day you will look back at this *crusade* of yours with nothing but regret.”

Now Will smiles too, and his smile is even less friendly than Dr. du Maurier’s. “Did he send you here to tell me that?”

Du Maurier merely looks at him.

“I don’t need any more warnings,” he tells her.

“Clearly,” she drawls, “you do.” She leans back in her seat, disappointed. “Then there is nothing more I can say to change your mind.”

“Sorry.”

“You are as intractable as he is.”

“Obviously.”

“And you will continue investigating him.”

He answers with another smile.

Her eyes refocus behind his head. “Then you should know that a few photographs are missing from your walls. A man named Arthur Rimes. R-I-M-E-S. And Mason Verger, the son of the slaughterhouse tycoon. You may have read about what happened to him, but something tells me you haven’t read the whole story.”

He stares at her. He can’t tell if her information is real or useful. He can’t tell if she wants to help him or is attempting sabotage. She presents a façade as smooth and slippery as Hannibal’s. Will wonders if she learned this trick from him, or he from her.

Du Maurier stands up. She replaces the scarf and the sunglasses, her protection, her disguise. When she turns to go, she tips the sunglasses down for one last look at him.

"If you value your life," she says, and her voice drops down to dust, "be… less… *interesting*."

He goes through his old copies of the *Post* and finds a few pieces on Mason Verger, the rich party boy who messed himself up on a designer drug resembling bath salts and ended up taking a broken mirror fragment to his face and feeding the cuttings to his dogs. Verger is currently in a coma. His doctors believe he has experienced brain death, but his sister is keeping him alive regardless. The Baltimore police have determined that Verger was alone at the time of the incident. The story doesn't scream out Hannibal's involvement—but then again, *the broken mirror*.

Will needs more information on both Verger and Arthur Rimes. He knows he could ask Barney for his weekly hour of internet access, but he is afraid that if he looks into either of these names and Hannibal finds out about it, he'll have all but signed Dr. du Maurier's death warrant. He will have to wait for another visit from Bev before he can find out anything more.

Will sighs, rubs hard at his eyes. He has a headache and it's slowing down his thinking, nibbling at the reins of his self-control. He can't stop his hand from wedging itself beneath the mattress of his cot. He finds the drawing where he hid it the night before. He pulls it out. The paper's corners are still crisp and the charcoal un-smudged. Hannibal must have sprayed it with a fixative.

He stares at the drawing for a long time, longer than he spent considering the articles on Verger. As he looks at it, he bites his nails. He tries to shut down his thinking for fear of what thoughts might come, but the thinking won't go, not ever, not entirely. The swell of her breast against the pillow. The little flexing of her toes underneath the sheet. The playful strokes of charcoal that suggest the fall of hair across her back. Hannibal had fun drawing that part. He likes her hair. Likes carding his fingers through it. And he likes the private expression on her face, which he has replicated with delicate exactitude. Tender, ever so slightly mocking. *You shouldn't be drawing me*, her expression says. *What a ridiculous thing for you to do. But I'll go along with it because you amuse me*.

Is the pendulum swinging? He can't tell. His head really hurts.

Will should destroy the drawing. Tear it up into a hail of blackened confetti, throw it in Hannibal's face when next he visits. Will tells himself he is going to rip it up, even as he carefully slides it back underneath his mattress. He still plans to destroy it. Later.

He regrets having momentarily surrendered to his baser self, because he has forgotten that he is scheduled to see Alana in the flesh that very afternoon. The date of Will's trial is drawing near, and today he's in for a session of trial prep with Nigella Karim. When Will arrives in the Coffee Room, he is so uncomfortable he can barely look at either woman. He keeps his

eyes on the floor and hides his face behind his hands whenever possible. The fluorescents make his head reverberate with pain.

He feels a soft hand on his arm. “Are you ok?” Alana asks him, and he nods, squirming out of her grip.

Karim barrels ahead. Knowing that Jack Crawford will testify for the prosecution, she grills Alana on how kindly disposed Jack is towards Will at the moment, whether Karim will be able to use him as a character witness and what questions she should ask him regarding Will’s current work for the FBI.

“You have to do everything you can for Jack,” Karim tells Will. “A few good words from him will mean a lot to a jury. Your consulting work displays not only your willingness to recover, to cooperate with rehabilitation, but it also demonstrates what an immensely valuable resource you represent both to the FBI and to the field of behavioral science in general. You have a lot to contribute, Will, and we have to make sure the jury knows that.”

A sour taste in Will’s mouth. “I’m saving lives,” he says from behind his steepled fingers. “At least, I’m trying to.”

“Then keep trying,” Karim says, with approval.

She makes Will rehearse his testimony. It’s about eighty percent lies, and he expects that the process of reciting it convincingly will be torturous. At first it is. Karim has to adjust his posture and keeps reminding him about eye contact, until Alana finally rescues him by sending an orderly back to Will’s cell to fetch his glasses. But even with his glasses on, Will feels needled and exposed, his headache growing steadily worse.

“I need you to focus,” Karim tells him.

“I *am*,” he says, miserably.

Finally he can’t take it. So he sets the pendulum swinging. It swings and swings, a beacon in the darkness, blunting his awareness of Alana, blunting his awareness of himself. His eyes become a little glazed, his expression set, but suddenly he is able to answer all of Karim’s questions exactly as she wants to hear them. It is easy, absurdly easy. He should have done it sooner. He merely has to remold himself over and over, depending on what version of him Karim needs to see. Sometimes the person he becomes is not far removed from the sniveling creature that made its confession to Jack. But at other times he is the forensic specialist able to view himself with the same detached precision and scientific insight that he devotes to all his cases. At still other times he strips away the professional guise and becomes a quiet man who has suffered with dignity through a debilitating illness and now just wants to get better.

Alana watches this performance—this succession of performances—with her jaw slackened.

When Karim finishes with Will, she actually shakes his hand, that’s how pleased she is with him. “That wasn’t so hard, was it?” she says, smiling.

“Not so hard,” he echoes, the pendulum still swinging.

Karim packs her briefcase and says goodbye to Alana. As soon as Karim is out of the room, Alana pulls her chair right up next to Will. “Look at me,” she says.

With effort, he does. She gently pulls back one of his eyelids.

“What are you doing?” he asks, drawing away.

“I’m sorry. I think there may have been a mistake with your medication. You seem… absent.”

“I have a headache.”

“You weren’t yourself just now, with Nigella.”

“Sure I was.”

“*Will*,” Alana says.

He raises his hands in surrender. “Maybe I wasn’t the version of myself you’re familiar with. But that doesn’t mean I wasn’t myself.”

“It was like you were lobotomized.”

He snorts gently. “Nigella Karim didn’t think so.”

“Nigella Karim doesn’t know you.”

He rubs his face, his eyeballs throbbing from the headache. “What do you want me to say?” he asks her, because he is too groggy to work it out himself.

“I want you to be honest.”

“I am being honest.”

“No, you’re not.” Alana sighs. “Will, what I just saw you do, it was like you were putting yourself into a dissociative state. Do you know how dangerous that could be, considering what you’re recovering from?”

He laughs, hollowly. “Afraid I’m gonna beast out and kill my lawyer?”

“No,” she says, firmly. “But I’m afraid of the psychic damage you may be doing to yourself. You put on a mask one time too many and you won’t be able to take it off again.”

“I know who I am,” Will says, disgusted by the implications of her warning. “You keep saying I have to do whatever I can to survive being in this place. Well, that’s what I’m doing. That’s all I’ve ever been trying to do!”

She just looks at him. She speaks in a thickened voice, assiduously emptied of all emotion. “Lying on the stand is something a guilty person would do.”

He rears back in shock. “Ah. I see. So it’s back to thinking I’m a real psychopath again.”

Her eyes go wide. “I never thought you were a psychopath. I could never think that about you!”

He stares at his handcuffs, refusing to look at her.

“Will,” she says, gently. “You are not a psychopath.”

The gentleness in her voice hurts him. “Are you convincing me or convincing yourself?”

“You’re not a psychopath,” she says, again.

“I know I’m not,” he mutters.

“I don’t think you do. I think you spend a lot of time worrying about the possibility that you really are what the world thinks you are. You can’t remember what happened while you were sick, and your imagination, that *incredibly* powerful imagination of yours, has been providing you with all kinds of explanations for those missing periods, but it’s all just—just phantoms in the dark, Will. You have to stop chasing them. Your confession to Jack, the song-and-dance number you just did for Nigella, everything that’s going on between you and Hannibal—all this acting-out won’t help you get better. It won’t help you face up to the truth. You can’t hide behind these games any more. Not with me.”

He doesn’t even know what she’s talking about. Does she think he’s a murderer or that he’s not murderer? He isn’t sure he cares either way. Let her think whatever she wants to think. Whatever Hannibal wants her to think. His head is killing him.

“Will… be honest with me. Tell me something true.”

“Something true,” he says, and he almost laughs. “Something *true*. You know what, Alana? I wish I could, but I can’t think of a single damned thing I can say that you’d actually believe. So why bother?”

Her face crumples. By the way she stands up, he can tell that her legs are trembling. “If you can’t be honest with me, at least be honest with yourself,” she says. “Get some rest. You really don’t look well.”

That, at least, she’s right about. By the time he gets back to his cell, his vision has fogged up around the edges. His headache is turning into a full-on migraine. When Barney makes his last rounds for the day, Will asks him for some aspirin. The night orderly brings the pills with his dinner and Will chokes them down gratefully. He tries to eat a little of the food, knowing he’ll only feel worse if he skips a meal. He chews slowly, painfully, until he can’t take it any more and has to lay his head down on the desk.

He hasn’t felt this bad since he was sick. He can’t be sick again, can he? The doctors are still monitoring him for any sign of the encephalitis’s return, but this is insane, he can’t relapse over the course of a single day. It’s just stress, simple stress, God knows he has enough to be stressed about.

No choice but to ignore the Ripper investigation for the night. Sleep off the migraine and get an early start tomorrow. He takes a step towards his cot and has to brace himself against the Ripper wall. The floor is tilting crazily underneath his feet. A terrible feeling of dizziness settles over him, warm and smothering. He leans his forehead against the cold brick and waits for it to pass. But it only gets worse. Back and forth the floor rocks underneath his feet. He doesn't have his sea legs yet. Has to work on that. He opens his eyes and watches the Lovers embracing in front of him; they are tearing at their skin and clothes as if trying to consume each other's flesh. The motions aren't loving or gentle. They are the violent, wild rutting of animals.

It's a photograph. Only a photograph.

"Help," Will says, but his voice is strangled. "Something's wrong."

He backs away from the wall, tries to put distance between himself and the Lovers. He looks at his dinner tray, the food half-eaten. The food. Hannibal must have them poisoning him.

"Help," he says, louder this time.

He has the sudden presentiment that he is being watched, that the creature that was once the black-feathered stag is trying to get into his cell. He spins around, looking for it in all the shadows of the ward. Where is it? Where is it?

He spins too much. The floor bucks and spills him sideways, his upper body smacking against the cot and his knees hitting the floor. He clings to the blankets as his cell begins to spin off its axis. His arms are too weak to heave him on the cot. Instead he slides to the floor, feels it rocking under him, back and forth, back and forth, lulling him to sleep. He covers his head as if expecting a blow.

"Help," he says again. "Something's wrong. Help. Something's wrong."

No one hears him. The cell is running like ink in the rain. The rain. He hears it pounding on the roof. It's a good, familiar sound and for a moment he just lies in bed, listening to it. It's early morning and the dogs are stirring. He can hear their nails clicking on the floor as they bide their time for breakfast. He should probably get up.

He throws back the comforter and climbs to his feet. There is something different about his little house. The proportions are all wrong. The living room ceiling is a little too low to the ground, and the room itself is so long that it has become almost cavernous. He stands there in his underwear, swaying, trying to work out who has wreaked havoc on his home. Soft whines from the dogs in the kitchen. But when he pads after the noises, he realizes that there is no kitchen. His living room stretches the entire width of the house. He can see the windows that face the backyard even when standing near his front door. And yet he still hears the dogs, barking now for his attention.

He walks to the back windows and sees that he is on the ocean. Not on a beach—on the open ocean. The water is calm, with a blanket of mist rolling over it. His house floats on the waves, which slap gently against the stairs of his porch, creamy water licking against the wooden siding. Beneath Will the floor sways like a breathing thing.

Are you in a safe place?

Yes. But I don't know about the dogs. I can't find them.

Don't worry yourself about the dogs.

I'll try not to.

He goes back to his bed and sits down heavily on its edge, trying to think. Since when has his house been a boat? Where does the engine live?

A hand covers his. Alana is sitting next to him on the bed. "It's going to be ok," she says. "Take deep breaths. Control your breathing."

I'm trying, he says. Shouldn't you be with Hannibal?

"We have an arrangement," she says. "I spend nights with him and days with you, remember?"

He does. It's not an ideal arrangement, but he's doing his best to be ok with it.

He says: I wish you could stay here with me, always. Do you want to?

"Sure." Then she says, "Kiss me."

Her mouth is very soft. Pliant, but demanding. The dogs stop barking, but the house sways harder and harder. Storm front approaching, he says. Where's the anchor?

"You put it out with the dogs this morning." She is untying her dress.

This doesn't feel right.

"Stop worrying." She pulls him on top of her.

The waves are crashing against his little house. It wasn't built to withstand such a heavy storm. He runs his hands up and down Alana's sides. She moans into his mouth and tries to pull his shirt off. He sits up to do it for her and that's when he notices a set of heavy antlers busting out of his mattress.

He pulls Alana off the bed. Antlers are sprouting from it, spearing the covers and pillows, sending feathers into the air.

He clutches Alana's hand, drags her behind him. Hold on to me, he says.

They run up the hallway together, their shoulders knocking off the walls every time a new wave hits the house.

Lightning dashes the sky. The windows are darkening. Antlers are coming up out of the floorboards now. Out of the walls. Antlers burrowing like termites through the ceiling.

Good, Will. Now tell me what you see.

He turns around to check on Alana, but Alana is gone. Instead he is holding hands with Abigail.

“It’s ok,” she tells him. “Look, the storm is dying down.”

And it is. The house shudders once, twice, before settling into perfect stillness.

We’re in the eye, Will tells her. Also, you’re dead.

“Thanks for rubbing it in.”

Her eyes are the bright blue of calm seas in sunlight.

What happened to you?

“Don’t you know?”

They haven’t found your body.

“That’s because you ate it.” Abigail adjusts the red scarf around her throat. “How did I taste?”

I don’t remember.

“Yes, you do. Try to remember. Can you try?”

No.

“There’s nothing to be afraid of.”

The howl of some unearthly thing. At the other end of the house, the creature stirs.

“You don’t have to be afraid of him,” says Abigail. A note of resentment in her voice. “He won’t hurt *you*.”

Will holds her by the shoulders to make sure she keeps her balance. The walls and floor now bristle with antlers. It isn’t an antler room. It’s an antler house. He could pick her up, push her down, skewer her in fifteen different places. It would be so easy.

“That isn’t how you did it.”

That’s how I remember doing it.

“You cut my throat in the kitchen. A foot away from where you shot my dad.”

I don’t remember.

“You apologized. You said you wished with all your heart that you could have protected me. You spoke to me like I was someone else. I cried into your shoulder and once I was dead, you placed your hand over the wet patch. You tasted the salt.”

I don't remember. I don't remember. There's been some mistake.

"You didn't want to do it, but you still enjoyed it, didn't you? You enjoyed killing me. You *always* enjoy it."

A howl that goes on and on. The black shadow paces in the other room.

"Dad," says Abigail. "There's someone else here."

The storm is back. The house is shaking again. The furniture slides back and forth with every crash of the waves. The pictures fall off the mantelpiece. The boat motor he likes to fiddle with topples over. His fishing poles slide to the floor one by one. All his things are breaking.

This isn't working. I'm giving him two more CC's.

Abigail slaps his face. "See?" she says. "See?"

He opens his eyes, only they are already open. He sees Abigail's smiling face projected on the wall. His whole body hurts. The little house is rocking, back and forth, back and forth. Through every window he watches the self-directed violence of the sea.

Will, I want you to focus on Abigail. Can you do that, Will?

Which Abigail? The girl in the boat who is holding his face, or the girl who is frozen in a smile, nothing but light thrown up against a wall? He can hear the distant buzz of a digital projector. It's the same photo he has hung up in his cell. This isn't his cell. Where is he? He tries to move, but his arms and legs are strapped down by harsh leather bindings. He's in something like a dentist's chair, with a light shining right in his face and a cannula for an IV line in his left hand. Is he in the hospital again?

A giant wave sends both him and Abigail sprawling. She lands hard and an antler's sharp tip slashes across her throat. Blood everywhere. He tries to staunch the bleeding, but his hands are shaking too hard to make much of a difference.

I didn't kill her, he says. I killed her father but I didn't kill her. And then, because he realizes his mouth wasn't moving the first time, "I didn't kill her."

"Don't look at me," says Dr. Chilton. "Look at Abigail. Can you see her, Will? Do you remember what she was wearing that day in the kitchen?"

"Red," says Will. "Where am I? What time is it?"

"What time do you think it is?"

"How should *I* know?" Will roars. Again he tries to free his hands but they are strapped down too tightly. The creature that was once the black-feathered stag snorts in anger.

"Don't do that," says Chilton. "You could hurt yourself. Try to calm down. You are safe here, Will. You are inside your little house, remember?"

The walls of the house flicker into reality, antlers everywhere, a projection on top of a projection.

Will shakes his head, trying to clear it. “No, I’m not. I’m in the Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane. Abigail’s bleeding, she needs help.”

“Why is Abigail bleeding, Will?”

“Slashed her throat. Carotids severed. He shouldn’t have done it that way—he shouldn’t have made her suffer, even for a second. But he couldn’t resist the fucking *symmetry*.”

“Who couldn’t? Who is ‘he’?”

The creature howls again, that horrible sound. Will tries to cover his ears but his hands are strapped down. He is on his knees, crawling through a thicket of antlers, trying to get away from the monster in the other room.

He’s coming out of it.

“I don’t understand what I’m doing wrong!” says Chilton. “I gave him the right dosage, the same dosage you told me to administer and it didn’t work. Now I’ve given him a little extra and he’s still fighting it.”

Don’t give him any more.

“But—”

You’ll put him out completely and he will be of no use to you.

Chilton sputters. “Look, you know he has the ability to put himself into a hypnotic trance. It shouldn’t be so hard for me to induce something similar!”

The creature grunts as it stalks after him. He clutches at the antlers, pulling himself along since he can no longer move his legs. His legs are strapped down. He can’t move. Where is he?

Will tries to focus. He is in a room. Not his cell. Not his house. A gothic room with high ceilings, elaborate moldings, and a window. A window. When was the last time he was in a room with a view? Though there isn’t much of a view right now. It is nighttime and the window is a column of empty dark. Lightning rends it, a wink and a flash. The flash of the projector, switching over now to a different photo of Abigail. A school picture. Her hair is braided and her smile close-mouthed.

The room keeps rocking back and forth, back and forth, just like his little house. A boat on the sea. And this room, like his little house, is inhabited by the creature that was once the black-feathered stag. The creature stands with its back to him, the projection of Abigail’s face falling over it, so that it is reduced to a black shadow across her smile. From dream to dream, this creature follows him everywhere.

Chilton is fussing with the IV. “A little Lorazepam will keep him docile.”

Considering how much psilocybin is already in his system, that would be tremendously imprudent, says the creature that was once the black-feathered stag, turning around to face Will.

Except the creature doesn't talk. Except it does. It does.

Because the creature isn't a stag. It is Hannibal Lecter. Will is strapped to a chair while Hannibal Lecter and Dr. Chilton shoot him up with psychotropic drugs. This isn't a dream. This is really happening.

"Somebody help me!" Will screams. "Can anybody hear me? Help me! Help me!"

On instinct Chilton slaps his hand over Will's mouth. Will bites down. Chilton yelps.

"—Somebody help me! Help me! Help!—"

"Good God!" says Chilton, whey-faced. He holds up his reddened palm so Hannibal can see. "He bit me!"

"I noticed."

"I'm putting him out."

"There's no need." Hannibal strides forward and says to Will, "If it hasn't already come to your attention, I'll point out that it is after hours in the hospital and all the personnel on this floor went home hours ago. There is no one to hear you scream, so you may as well save your throat."

Will stops screaming. He stares at Hannibal, whose face transforms back into the unforgiving sharpness of the creature from his dreams. "You can't do this," he says, the words slurring over his thickened tongue. "I didn't agree to this. You'll both lose—lose your licenses."

"We need to put him out," says Chilton, who looks horrified. "Some Midazolam. He won't remember."

"Not yet," says Hannibal.

"He's completely lucid!"

Hannibal is watching Will closely. "No," he says. "He's not."

He comes forward. Antlers brush the ceiling as he looms over Will, but then he crouches down alongside the chair so that their eyes are level. "Look at me," he orders. "Look me in the eye."

Oh no. Will turns his head away.

"Won't you look at me, Will?"

If he looks at Hannibal, there's no telling what he might do.

Hannibal says, “Think back to that kitchen. The Hobbs kitchen on a sunny morning. The smell of breakfast in the air. Eggs and sausage. You remember the smell of that kitchen, Will?”

Will's throat is working furiously. “It smelled…of blood.”

The smile in Hannibal’s voice. “You saw Hobbs in the corner. He was holding Abigail. He had a knife to her throat.”

“The same knife he used to kill Mrs. Hobbs,” says Will.

“The same knife he used to kill Mrs. Hobbs. You aimed your gun. He took the knife to her throat and that was when you pulled the trigger.”

“He wouldn’t go down,” Will says.

“So you had to keep shooting him.”

“He wouldn’t go down,” Will says. Back and forth, back and forth, the room is swinging. The room is swinging like the pendulum.

“How long did it take Abigail to die?” Hannibal asks.

“Not long,” says Will. “She bled out quickly. Less than a minute.”

“Late afternoon,” Hannibal intones. “The windows spilling their blue light into the room. What did the kitchen smell like then?”

“Blood,” Will says. “She didn’t want to die in that house. She cried so much. After everything, dying in that house.”

“She fought you, didn’t she?” Dr. Chilton asks. “She scratched you.” He is hovering behind Hannibal, watching his ministrations eagerly.

“She didn’t…she knew there wasn’t a point…” Will feels the pendulum swinging. He tries to stop it.

“What did you do with her body?”

In the woods. Hannibal with bloody gloves, clutching Will’s arms. *Stay still. Don’t struggle. I don’t want to hurt you.* Something in his throat…

The creature is almost on him. It flexes its long arm, reaching for his face…

“Don’t fight it, Will,” Chilton says. “I thought you wanted to remember?”

“Will,” says Hannibal. He is leaning over Will, in the woods, not in the woods. In his house, not in his house. He is leaning over Will, he is reaching for his face.

“Look at me,” he says.

“Keep away from me,” Will whispers. He twists his neck away.

“I need you to look at me.” And Hannibal takes hold of Will’s chin.

The feeling of Hannibal’s hands on Will’s face sends him into a frenzy. “No! No!” He tries to twist out of his grip. “Don’t touch me!”

Hannibal, fingers tight around Will’s chin, tilts his face forward until Will can see Hannibal’s eyes, the stag’s eyes.

“Don’t touch me!” Will screams. “Get your fingers off me, *you cannibal!*”

And Hannibal lets him go.

It wasn’t the word he meant to say. He wanted something bluer. He doesn’t know why this word came out instead. But the way Hannibal releases his face tells Will everything he needs to know.

“Why do you say that?” Hannibal asks, voice guttural.

And oh, Will looks at him now, right in the eye.

“Why do you call me ‘cannibal’?”

“It’s what you are,” Will says. “Isn’t it.”

“Who do you see, Will?” Dr. Chilton whispers. “Is it Garret Jacob Hobbs?”

Both Will and Hannibal turn to look at him. Chilton shuts up immediately, perhaps at the shock of seeing the same exact expression of pronounced disgust on both men’s faces.

Will and Hannibal turn to each other again. “They’re not…” Will shakes his head gently, trying to clear it. “They’re not surgical trophies. Are they.”

Hannibal smiles, too quickly for Chilton to see.

“They’re…your groceries,” Will says. “Oooooh…” He knocks his skull against the headrest. “Feeding me these lies, all along. But lies aren't the only things you’ve been feeding me…”

The creature watches him, its black hungry eyes willing him to go on.

Will says, “It’s all just meat, anyway. We’re all just meat in the end. So why not? Dog eat dog. Some people don’t deserve anything better. Only way they can contribute. A beautiful dish on a beautiful table. Consumed and burned away in the continuance of someone else’s life. Death for life, death for life, it’s so elegant.” And he begins to laugh.

“I gave him too much,” Dr. Chilton says, saucer-eyed.

“Shhh,” says Hannibal.

Will laughs harder. “Hannibal… the Cannibal!” he chokes. He can’t stop laughing. Tears sting at his throbbing eyes. Hannibal is smiling at him fondly.

Chilton says, “He’s delirious.”

“Fetch the Midazolam,” Hannibal says. “You won’t get anything more from him tonight.”

“Isn’t there some on the cart?” Chilton goes to the medicine cart next to the projector, rifles through the trays as Will continues howling with laughter.

“I must have forgotten it in the dispensary,” lies Hannibal.

Chilton mutters to himself, “Do I have to do everything?” as he leaves the room. Hannibal and Will watch him go. Will is still yelping with the aftershocks of laughter.

“If anyone deserves to be eaten,” he says, “it’s that man.”

“My thoughts exactly,” says Hannibal.

He turns back to Will. Agonizingly slow. Finally they are alone. No bars between them. All bets, off.

“I know everything now,” Will says.

“You do.”

“No more fun. May as well kill me.”

“Don’t get ahead of yourself,” says Hannibal.

Will shuts his eyes. “I want this to be over.”

“No, you don’t.”

“I want to wake up.”

“Oh, Will.” Hannibal’s expression is terrifying, and tender. “You are awake. You and I are as awake as we can be. It’s the rest of them who sleep this life away.” He leans over, and with infinite gentleness and patience, he lays a kiss on Will’s forehead.

Chapter 16

Chapter Summary

Will takes a page from the Hannibal playbook.

When he first wakes up, he doesn't remember. His past is a haze. His present is a trap. He is handcuffed to a bed and almost every part of him is painful. There is an oxygen mask fitted over his mouth. His nose feels too raw to breathe through. An IV line is embedded in his hand, a sensor taped over his finger. He hears the heart rate monitor beeping away. So it's the hospital again.

A nurse comes to check his vitals. By her ID badge, he sees that he is still in the Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane.

"What happened?" he croaks into his breathing mask.

"Try not to move. We had to pump your stomach last night."

He stares at her. "Why would you do that?"

She glances at his chart. "Because you ingested a large quantity of Lorazepam. If it weren't for the quick response of Dr. Chilton, you might have died."

Will is too stunned to speak. He has no memory of this.

She removes the mask for him. "I'll let the doctor know you're awake."

Awake. The word sounds a silver chime within him, he doesn't know why.

He lies in bed, blinking and breathing, blinking and breathing. Everything is muzzy. This room has a window. It is squat and smudged, set into the wall almost at the ceiling, but still—a window. The shadow of leaves waving lazy patterns in the air. God, when was the last time he was in a room with a view?

And Will sits up, even though the movement burns the muscles in his chest. He saw a window last night. He was out of his cell. But it wasn't this window. It wasn't this room. Where was it? Why is there a gaping hole where his recollection ought to be? He tries to summon a picture of the last thing he remembers. Du Maurier—hard to forget. Karim and

Alana—hazy, but existent. After that, it's all one livid smear of illness and panic. He remembers swallowing some aspirin. Not Lorazepam, just aspirin.

Everything else is blacked out. Redacted.

He can hear the heart rate monitor picking up its pace. Someone tried to poison him last night. Obviously that someone was Hannibal. But why would Hannibal poison him? Not exactly his style. Unless he did it just to prove he could. And now Will owes his life to Dr. Chilton? All of this sounds pretty damned improbable.

Speak of the devil. Chilton appears in the doorway, looking even jumpier than normal.

"Mr. Graham," he says. "Well, well, well. How are you feeling?"

Something about the sight of Chilton, smug and buzzing in his checkered tie, puts Will on edge, more on edge than the hospital director usually makes him. He sits up straight, spine thrumming like a stricken chord. He stares at Dr. Chilton, a hard flat stare.

If Chilton is unnerved by this stare, he doesn't show it. "Would you like to tell me why you did it?"

Will says nothing. Just keeps staring.

A brisk clap of Chilton's hands. "Now, this is no time for the silent treatment. I saved your life, after all. The least you can do is tell me how you managed to swallow ten times the normal dosage of Lorazepam. I suppose you've been hoarding the medication in your cell? Agent Crawford's fault, of course. He is the one who insisted that security around you be so relaxed; if I had been allowed to look after you properly, you never would have gotten the opportunity to take your own life. Well? Do you have anything to say? I know you can speak. The nurse told me you were talking."

"You're lying," Will says, and the damage to his throat makes the words sound like a growl.

Chilton actually jumps a little. "And what exactly am I supposed to be lying about?"

"All of it."

"Don't be absurd. The evidence is all around you. You see where you are. You feel what's happened to your body. You experienced a Lorazepam overdose last night, Mr. Graham. You collapsed in your cell. You were dizzy, confused, and having trouble breathing. Judging by the way you resisted treatment, you were probably hallucinating. Hence the bruising on your arms."

Will looks down and sees that both his arms are red and swollen. He must have been struggling against some very tight restraints.

"Smoke," he says, "and mirrors."

"Now, now. You cannot deny this has happened to you."

"*Something* happened to me," Will says. "I'm not denying that."

"What do you remember?"

Will hears the note of anxiety in Chilton's question. He doesn't answer. He stares intently at the marks on his arms, wishing he could touch them, but his hands are cuffed to the sides of the bed.

"Memory loss is to be expected," Chilton says. "It's a side effect of all those pills you took."

"I didn't take them."

"You don't remember taking them."

"*I didn't take them*." Will's throat aches. "If there was anything… strange in my stomach… then I wasn't the one who put it there."

In the woods, bloody gloves*, staystilldon'tmove.* Something in his throat.

Will swallows, which triggers a cascade of pain down his battered gullet.

"If you didn't put it there," Chilton is saying, "then who did?"

Will ignores this. He has latched on to another scrap of memory, a tray of half-eaten dinner on his desk. "They must have put it in my food."

"A member of my staff?"

Will doesn't answer. He is thinking. He wags his head back and forth, as if trying to dislodge a fly.

"That is a very serious accusation," Chilton says. "I screen every staff member in this hospital myself. They are all highly trained. None of them would tamper with your food or administer a potentially lethal dose of medication by accident. These thoughts are the product of paranoiac mania, Mr. Graham. You seem to be developing quite the persecution complex."

Will isn't listening. He knows Dr. Chilton is telling him a tale. Will might not remember what happened to him, but he knows the person behind it all. The master of illusions. Will is exhausted, rusted over, but inside him the pendulum swings so free and easy, it almost flies. It slices through his mind, scattering the fog until everything is clear. It takes him only seconds to become Hannibal Lecter.

Dr. Chilton doesn't notice a thing.

"Now, the date of your trial is coming up. Two weeks from Tuesday, isn't that right? It won't look very good, a foiled suicide attempt right before you appear in front of a jury and face up to what you've done. You would say anything right now to mitigate suspicion."

Will as Hannibal Lecter, watching Frederick talk at him. Frederick is afraid of what Will knows, and of what Will doesn't know. Frederick is a spineless cretin with no moral sense to

speak of. It is so very easy to pluck his strings. Professional success is all Frederick hankers after, and Will Graham offers him a veritable jackpot. An attempted suicide wouldn't much interest Frederick. A poisoning, even less so. No, what Frederick wants is for Will Graham to remember. To remember—at any cost.

Chilton finally falters. He has become aware of the way Will is watching him with unblinking eyes, his expression hardened, deadened. Like no one's home. Except someone is.

"Are you even listening to me?" he asks Will.

The pendulum swings away, swings away.

Will tilts his head. When he speaks, his voice is so roughened it sounds like a stranger's. Every syllable has been sharpened to kill.

"You are as poor a liar as you are a hypnotist."

And lo, he marvels at the transformation that occurs. All of Chilton's self-possession, out the window. Suddenly the psychiatrist is a scared little boy, whose distress Will drinks right up.

"I *beg* your pardon?"

"Yes," Will says, "you should."

"What is it that you think you remember?"

He smiles infinitesimally. "Wouldn't you like to know."

Dr. Chilton backs away. "You were hallucinating, I told you. Obviously it has placed some very warped ideas into your head…"

"Unfortunately for you, they're not the same ideas you tried to place there." Will sighs mockingly. "This could get very bad for you, Frederick. I am not Abel Gideon. I have yet to be convicted of any crime. Once I get out of here, I am going to make sure the whole world knows what you are, and what you did."

Chilton's voice shakes. "You are never getting out of here, Mr. Graham."

"Wanna bet?" The pendulum is fading. He got what he needed from being Hannibal. He can become himself again.

Chilton scurries away, muttering to himself. "…Completely ridiculous…I don't have to listen to this..."

"Dr. Chilton," Will says loudly.

And the doctor turns back to look at him. Will's face is pale and solemn, human now in a way it wasn't a moment ago.

“Hannibal Lecter did what he did last night only because he wanted to,” Will says. “Because he was curious what would happen. Hannibal Lecter is a psychopath. You don’t have that excuse.”

Chilton’s dignity is the only thing that keeps him from flat-out running from the room.

Once the psychiatrist is gone, Will leans back in his hospital bed. Always fun to watch Chilton squirm. And how very satisfying, using Hannibal Lecter to solve Will Graham’s problems for him. As far as Will is concerned, it’s the least Hannibal can do.

But the satisfaction fades quickly. It may have gotten him results, but it was just a trick. A stupid trick. Role-playing. The fact remains that Will still can’t remember anything of what happened last night. He thought reconstructing the events from Hannibal’s perspective might stimulate his own memory, but no—it’s all still a blank. Intellectually he understands something of what transpired. Hannibal must have convinced Dr. Chilton to dose Will’s food. Will felt terrible all day yesterday, he remembers that much; they must have contaminated multiple meals so that he’d be less likely to notice. Once the drug built up in his system he passed out, whereupon they removed him from his cell, strapped him down, and forcibly injected him with something so Chilton could wheedle him into a hypnotic trance. Meanwhile Hannibal observed all of the proceedings with the most exquisite delight. And to cover everything up, they faked a drug overdose. Pumped his stomach to destroy whatever evidence remained of their little brainwashing experiment. Maybe Hannibal did it all just for the challenge of trying to convince Will he really had attempted suicide. That part was low, even for Hannibal.

Will goes over these events in his mind, scrutinizing them first clinically, then angrily. He has to remember. He needs to remember. Anything could have happened while he was out of it. What would Hannibal have done with an opportunity like that? He had Will almost all to himself, a Will who was mentally and physically compromised, a Will without filters. The wind-up toy, out of its box.

Will swallows again, just to feel the pain. Try as he might to jolt his memory, the only detail his mind seems to have retained from its agonies last night is that he was in a room with a fucking window.

They keep him isolated in his hospital bed for the rest of the day. Constant supervision from the nurses. They won’t answer his questions, but he knows he must be on suicide watch. He receives no visitors. He imagines Jack trying to beat down a door somewhere with Dr. Chilton fending him off. He imagines Alana tormenting herself as she wonders what she did wrong. He imagines Beverly, afraid and confused and dying to see him without being able to tell anyone why. He imagines Hannibal weaving a web of lies around them all. At least Will knows Hannibal couldn’t have been out ripping last night. That’s a consolation, however small.

They bring him solid food that evening. Three orderlies, a guard, and a nurse, all there to watch him eat. The orderlies unlock one of his hands as the nurse deposits the tray on the

sliding table over his bed. Dinner is a gray slab of meatloaf and some stubby carrots. If he were really in danger of killing himself, this food wouldn't be helping matters.

Will finds himself staring at it. He doesn't know why. It's like he has never seen food before, like he has never experienced its inculcating smell. He can see the little grains of ground-up meat in microscopic detail. Pale juices seeping out on to the plate. *Flesh*, Will thinks, and his skin prickles with impending sickness. The heart rate monitor picks up, begins racing.

"What's the matter?" the nurse asks, as Will's pulse skyrockets. "It won't bite."

"Dog eat dog," Will says, in an empty voice.

And without another word, he twists away from dinner, leans over the bed railing, and retches bile. The nurse and the orderlies scramble around him. The guard steps forward.

"Take it away," Will moans, his mouth dripping. "Please, just get rid of it."

The orderlies remove the offending dinner tray. The nurse shines a light in his eyes, orders him to breathe. A swirl of activity he's only peripherally aware of. Will is clammy and in pain, overwhelmed by all of this medical attention, but suddenly he is smiling.

He remembers more than just the window.

The next morning the floodgates open: he receives seven visitors at once. It starts as raised voices in the hallway, then a cacophony of footsteps. Alana and Hannibal stride into his room, followed closely by Jack, Beverly, Zeller, and Price, with Chilton bringing up the rear. Roll out the barrel, the gang's all here.

"Now wait just a minute…" Chilton is saying, but no one listens. The mob converges around Will's bed.

"I'm sorry to do this to you, Will," Jack rumbles. "But we have to talk, right now."

"Jack," Alana hisses under her breath.

"The Ripper?" Will asks. His eyes fly between Hannibal, an impenetrable fortress, and Jack, a tightly coiled spring.

Jack waves a folder. "Baltimore PD found another body this morning."

"For God's sake!" Alana says, fists clenched. "You haven't even asked him how he is."

Jack rolls his eyes at the ceiling. "How are you, Will?"

"Let me see the file," says Will, with a feeble reach of one of his cuffed hands.

"See?" Jack says, with a vindicated look at Alana.

She lets out a sound that could be mistaken for a roar. “You’re not talking to him until I have time to gauge whether he is well enough to consult for you. Wait outside, and let me and Hannibal do the jobs you originally asked us to do!”

“I’m not going anywhere, Alana,” Jack says. “I’ve been trying to get in here for the last twenty-four hours and I am not waiting another minute.”

“Your team, then,” says Hannibal, stepping smoothly between Jack and Alana.

Jack sighs. “Outside,” he says to the agents. And then, “You too, Beverly,” when she makes no move to go.

Beverly’s eyebrows draw up in protest, but she doesn’t have a choice. Hannibal is watching. She throws Will a commiserating look as she exits the room. Will’s heart sinks. Of course they’d send away the one person he’s actually happy to see.

Hannibal sees Will looking after Beverly. Will sees Hannibal sees. Their stares snap together as if magnetized.

I know what you are, you son of a bitch, Will thinks. But he doesn’t let this knowledge reach his eyes. Better to keep Hannibal guessing.

Hannibal breaks the stare first. He draws up a chair for Alana and one for himself, and they sit together on one side of Will’s bed. Jack sits on the other. Meanwhile Chilton paces in anxious little circles near the door.

“How are you feeling?” Alana asks Will.

“Annoyed. I have been handcuffed to this bed for thirty hours. I want to go back to work.”

She nods. “Before you can do that, you need to talk to us.”

Will says nothing. His eyes slide from face to face. His three psychiatrists and Jack. Four different agendas, and none of them in Will’s best interests. If he were speaking to them individually, he might know how to play this. Dealing with them all together presents a challenge.

“Do you want to talk?” Alana prompts him.

“Not particularly.”

“We have been very concerned about you,” Hannibal says, “as you can imagine.”

“I can imagine,” Will says. “But you don’t have to worry. I’m fine.”

“‘Fine’ isn’t a word I’d associate with you,” Alana says, a little sadly.

“Come on, Will,” Jack says. “Get it off your chest. We’ll put it behind us and you can return to work.”

“What happened, Will?” Alana asks, more firmly now.

“You want to know what happened?” Will says. “Ask your colleagues.”

Chilton stops his pacing to throw a panicked glance at Hannibal, but Hannibal, typically impassive, doesn’t even look at him.

“We want to hear it from you,” Hannibal says. “We want to know what you remember.”

“I bet you do,” Will says.

“You can talk to just one of us, if that’s easier.” Will hears the hope in Alana’s voice. She wants him to choose her.

Will considers her offer. But who to talk to? The cannibal, his accomplice, his buddy, or his lover? Will isn’t exactly dazzled by any of these options.

“Look,” he says instead, “you all have the wrong idea here. I didn’t try to kill myself.”

Alana and Hannibal look at each other. It’s a glance of compassionate conspiracy. Obviously neither of them is surprised to hear Will say this.

Jack asks him, “Then what were you trying to do?”

“I wasn’t trying to do anything. I didn’t take those pills.” Will directs this next at Alana, who he can see is struggling to contain her emotions. “I didn’t take them.”

She clears her throat. “You can’t pretend this didn’t happen, Will.”

“I can when it didn’t actually happen.”

“If this wasn’t a suicide attempt,” Hannibal says, “then what was it?”

“A mistake,” Will says, concealing a knife beneath the words.

“You took the medication by mistake?” Hannibal’s voice gives away nothing except some mild incredulity.

“It wasn’t my mistake,” Will says, with a quick look at Chilton, whose face goes pale.

But Hannibal actually *smiles* at Will, as if he has just said something sweet.

“You are attempting to appear strong in front of us.” His voice is warm and gentle. The good doctor is in. “You worry that if you tell us the truth, we might think less of you. We might think you weak. But I assure you, Will, your worries are baseless. We will always see you as nothing less than a force to be reckoned with.”

This is an impressive performance, perfectly pitched for its intended audience, which is everyone in this room who isn’t currently chained to a bed. But Will is glad for the handcuffs, because right now they’re the only things keeping him from lunging for Hannibal’s throat.

“If that’s true,” he growls, “then you should know *I would never try to kill myself*.”

“Will,” Alana says. She is looking down at her folded hands. “If you don’t remember taking the pills, it might mean you weren’t yourself when you took them. You could have been dissociating again.”

He moues with disdain. “I wasn’t dissociating!”

“You aren’t well.” Alana’s control is steel-plated, but it is slipping. There is the barest tremor in her voice. “You haven’t been well for a long time. And I’m worried consulting for Jack is making you worse. All those files in your cell, those photos on your walls… they’ve taken their toll. My recommendation is that you take a step away from investigative work for the time being.”

Will stares at her in utter horror. He knows Hannibal has put her up to this. Another check from the Chessmaster. But Will won’t let it happen. And he’s certain that neither will Jack.

Jack doesn’t let him down. “Wait just a minute, Alana. Will says the cases are the only things that are keeping him grounded right now. It would be worse for him if we took them away.”

“Oh, you have some nerve,” Alana whispers, with a smile of disbelieving fury. “After everything that’s happened, after everything you’ve done, making it sound like you’ve been handing him the work for his own good. It’s all been for your good, Jack. Always your good, and no one else’s. If he had died,”—she brings one hand up to her mouth—“if he had died, you’d have only mourned him because there’d be no one left to catch your killer for you!”

The sublimated violence in her voice is staggering. She is furious with Jack—even Jack looks scared by the force of it. Will knows that Alana has been harboring some resentment towards Jack, but he had no idea of its magnitude.

Hannibal, naturally, is unsurprised by Alana’s outburst. No doubt he’s been stoking the flames behind closed doors. He places his hand on her arm. “Jack cares about Will,” he says quietly. “We all do.”

Jack’s proud façade is inflexible, but beneath it he does look a little ashamed of himself. “Alana, I realize this is terrible timing,” he says. “I owe you an apology for that. And I owe Will an apology too.”

“You have nothing to apologize for,” Will says. “Not this time. I’m working this case, Jack, whether you want me to or not.”

“Well, if it were up to me, I’d let you get some rest,” Jack says. “But it’s not up to me. It’s up to the Chesapeake Ripper. We’ve got three deaths in four days; four deaths in ten—the Ripper’s running very hot, hotter than ever. I need you to look at this latest victim and tell me whether you think he’s closed the window, or if he still has some killing left to do.”

It takes all of Will’s self-control not to turn his head to look at Hannibal. “Give me the file and I’ll tell you what I think.”

Alana puts an arm out to intercept the file should Jack try to hand it to him. “I can’t in good conscience let you work this case, Will.”

“Jack needs me,” Will says. “He isn’t going to catch the Ripper without me.”

“Other people can help him with this one. Hannibal can.”

“I will do my utmost to assist Jack, of course,” Hannibal says.

“I appreciate that,” says Jack. “You’re a great asset to the investigation, Hannibal, but there’s no one who can do this like Will.”

Hannibal looks ever so slightly offended by this. But he says, “I am well aware of that fact.”

“Do *you* think he needs to be removed from the case?” Jack asks, a note of appeal in his voice.

They all turn to look at Hannibal expectantly—Alana with hope, Will with dread.

Hannibal’s fathomless eyes spend an age evaluating Will. “That might be for the best,” he says.

It’s the second time Hannibal has tried outright to remove Will from the Ripper investigation, and Will isn’t having it. He sputters in fury. “And what, I don’t get a say in this?” He turns on Jack. “This is insane. You don’t have to listen to them. I’m telling you, I can work the case. The Chesapeake Ripper didn’t make me suicidal. I am not suicidal.”

“Then why aren’t you eating?” Hannibal asks.

A flush of ice water through Will’s veins. He turns back around to Hannibal. “*What*?”

Hannibal slowly tilts his head. He scents prey. “The nurses say you have been refusing meals.”

Will is reeling, off-balance. He hadn’t seen this coming. Hannibal knows it. There is a glimmer of a taunt in his lidded eyes. Will can’t look directly at them. He can’t be sure what Hannibal knows, or what Hannibal thinks Will knows.

Hannibal tuts softly. “Food is life, Will. You can’t want one without desiring the other.”

Will can feel Hannibal’s stare boring into him, stripping at his skin. He doesn’t understand why it isn’t leaving marks. He summons whatever reserves of willpower he has left and tries to get a handle on himself.

“Oh, c-come on,” he says. “I’ve missed *two* meals; that doesn’t make me on a hunger strike. I’m just… not hungry.”

But he knows he has already lost the match. Alana’s eyebrows have drawn up. Jack is rubbing his brow. “You gotta eat, Will,” he says.

Hannibal shakes his head, all paternalistic disappointment. “It pains me to say this, but you are in no state to return to investigative work. Your health comes first, Will. You must let others chase the Ripper in your stead. Your trial is imminent and, whatever happens there, it is sure to be a terrible ordeal. You have to prepare yourself. Spend the next two weeks on your recovery; concentrate solely on that. No more distractions. That is my assessment of the situation, and I am sure my colleagues would agree.”

“I agree,” says Alana.

“Uh—” says Chilton.

Everyone looks surprised—perhaps they had forgotten Chilton was even in the room with them. But now they all turn to look at him.

Hannibal’s face is suddenly—ominously—blank. “Do you disagree?” he asks.

Chilton looks very jumpy indeed. “I—it’s not that I disagree, of course—”

“Then what is it?”

Will feels Chilton’s panic coming out in waves—it’s an opportunity. He sees it. He knows it. Without thinking twice, he seizes it with both hands.

“I was poisoned!” The words burst out of him, and the others turn to stare. “You want to know why I’m not eating? It’s ‘cause last time I did, I ingested enough sedatives to nearly kill me.”

Alana’s mouth drops. Jack’s eyes widen. Chilton loosens his collar. Hannibal has no reaction whatsoever.

“What do you mean?” Alana asks slowly, in a voice of forced calm. “You’re saying someone slipped the Lorazepam into your food?”

“Yes, Alana, that’s exactly what I’m saying.”

Now Hannibal smiles the scalpel smile. “You are suggesting someone did this to you deliberately?”

Will smiles back. “The thought had crossed my mind.”

“Why would anyone want to poison you?” Jack asks, looking startled.

“I don’t know.” Will looks at Chilton, the threat plain on his face. “You’d have to ask them.”

Chilton looks like he is about to be escorted up to the execution block.

Hannibal glances quickly between Chilton and Will. He opens his mouth, obviously about to spin this into a grand paranoid delusion, so Will plows right over him. “But Dr. Chilton *assures* me that the poisoning wasn’t intentional. It was just an accident—isn’t that what you said, Doctor?”

Now they're all looking at Chilton again.

Dr. Chilton's face is fishbelly white. "I—uh," he says, swallowing. "Yes, well, there may have been—ah—an oversight."

"An *oversight*?" Alana is on her feet, her eyes burning. Jack stands too, and actually takes a step towards Dr. Chilton. Only Hannibal isn't visibly furious. He is a black hole, imploding with emptiness.

If looks could kill, Chilton would now be very, very dead.

He straightens his collar again. "It is—ah—possible that Mr. Graham has been receiving the wrong meals for the last few days. The food was intended for a different patient, one whom —ah—the orderlies have trouble compelling to take his medication. This particular patient has developed quite a tolerance for Lorazepam, so the dosage would have been—ah—quite high."

Jack is shaking his head. "Some kind of doctor you are! You couldn't tell that you were systematically sedating one of your patients into an overdose? You're supposed to be rehabilitating him. Instead you almost killed him!"

Chilton backs away, palms raised. "It was a mix-up. No foul play—merely an extremely regrettable mistake. I will of course be conducting a thorough investigation and the staff member responsible will have to answer for his or her carelessness."

Alana is on the warpath. "Why didn't you say something before now? You let us all think Will had done this to himself!"

"I am truly sorry, Dr. Bloom. This mistake didn't come to my attention until—ah—a few moments before your arrival here today."

Will is working overtime to keep himself from smiling. He settles back in his hospital bed and watches the show. But after a moment he realizes that he's the only one who's watching. Hannibal, still seated at his bedside, is no longer observing Chilton's verbal dismemberment. Hannibal is observing Will.

The intensity of his stare is truly terrible. Will can actually *feel* Hannibal's attention trying to force its way into him. Hannibal hungers to know what Will is thinking. Hannibal hungers to know what Will remembers. Hannibal hungers to inhabit Will's mind, so that he might see out through Will's eyes and look directly at himself.

Will does the only thing he can do. He absorbs this horrible, penetrating stare and emits it right back at Hannibal.

They stay like that, for how long Will couldn't say, as the others continue shouting at each other.

"—this is absolutely inexcusable—"

"—as I've said, a regrettable accident—"

"—Regrettable? *Regrettable*?—"

"—first chance we get, we're transferring Will out of this place—"

"—lodging a formal complaint—"

Hannibal leans forward, his voice very soft. He says to Will: "You might have told us you'd been poisoned first thing, the moment we entered this room. Why didn't you?"

There is a low thrum underneath Hannibal's calm question that silences the others. They look back at Will.

He shrugs. "I was worried you wouldn't believe me. Can't imagine why I thought that."

"*Will*," says Alana, with heartbreak heavy in her voice. And then she turns on Chilton. "What are you waiting for? You've kept him starved, isolated, and restrained for more than a day for no reason other than your own incompetence. Get him un-cuffed. *Now*."

Chilton falls over himself to obey. He summons orderlies and instructs guards, all while continuing to apologize to Alana and Jack. Will tunes it out—the orderlies are releasing one of his hands. The second he is free, he says, "Jack!"

Before Will's psychiatric team can weigh in with their opinions, Jack has handed him the file for the latest Ripper victim. Gabrielle Buchanan, found laid out on an inflatable float in her own swimming pool. Exsanguinated. All five liters of her blood poured into the water beneath her. Will looks at the photos, very aware of Hannibal watching him all the while.

Meanwhile Chilton is still issuing apologies to Alana, who suddenly looks very tired of it all.

"It's Will you should be apologizing to," she says.

Dr. Chilton, a step away from openly prostrating himself, looks over at Will. "Mr. Graham," he says, with pleading eyes. "Will. Please allow me to apologize on behalf of myself and this entire institution for the ordeal you've suffered at our hands."

Will doesn't even look at him. He has his file, and that's what matters. He says, "Fine. Just don't let it happen again."

"Ah—ah—I won't," says Chilton. "And I apologize to you as well, Dr. Lecter," he yelps, in Hannibal's general direction.

Will looks up from his file. Hannibal's eyes are flicking between Dr. Chilton and Will. His expression is closed, but Will still sees plenty there. Calculation. Amusement. Disappointment. An acknowledgement of Will's having bested him, if only temporarily. And an animal rage, directed at Chilton, who has so completely caved under pressure.

Hannibal takes a long slow breath through his nose. "You have a great deal to answer for, Frederick," he says, with absolute calm, "as you well know."

Chapter 17

Chapter Summary

An unexpected treat.

Within the hour, he is back in his cell. He is a little stunned to find that he is actually happy to see these 48 square feet of concrete, brick, and iron. He tells himself that he is only pleased to be reunited with his files, the physical markers of his investigation of Hannibal. Truth is, he is now so inured to his own captivity that he has begun thinking of this cell as home.

Barney escorts him inside, and gets to work unlocking the handcuffs and leg shackles. In an undertone the guards won't hear, Barney says, "I'm glad to see you looking ok."

Will smiles a little. He's happy to see Barney, too.

Barney locks the door, sends the guards away, and then leans up right against the bars. He whispers:

"I'm gonna be frank with you, Mr. Graham. I don't know how a thing like that coulda happened, that much sedative getting into your food. That isn't somebody's hand slipping with a bottle. That's somebody slipping with a bottle *four times*. I promise you, I'm gonna get to the bottom of it. Nothing like that is gonna slip by me again. I'll taste all your food myself if I have to."

"It's all right, Barney," Will whispers back. "Wasn't your fault."

Barney doesn't look convinced.

Will continues: "Do me a favor and don't look into it. Stay as far away from this as you can. It'd be better for you that way. I can take care of it myself."

Barney raises his eyebrows. "You're in a cell, Mr. Graham. What are you gonna do?"

"Just trust me," Will says. "Because God knows, if there's anyone in this hospital I trust, it's you."

Barney drops his voice even more, so that Will has to lean in to hear him. "Probably you got that right. Hasford and Green came by here while you were in the infirmary—Dr. Chilton's

assistants. Wanted to toss your cell. Orders from the Doctor, apparently. Well, I told them I didn't care where their orders came from; unless they have authorization from the FBI, they ain't tossing nothing. There's classified material in that cell, I told them. Active cases. They can't just go throwing papers around. People might get hurt, innocent people. I made enough noise about it that they backed right off. But they were eager to get in there, Mr. Graham. Real eager."

"Thanks, Barney," Will says, with feeling.

Barney is so transported with outrage that he barely hears Will. "You got sick because of what we fed you—what we fed you! You didn't do anything wrong. They got no right to toss your cell!"

"No," Will says, with a sigh. "No, they don't."

Jack and the BAU team give Will a handful of minutes to get settled, and then they are back in the corridor beyond the bars, keen to resume their discussion of the Ripper's latest murder. Will is keen too, so keen that it takes him a moment to register that Hannibal is with them, lurking at the back of the group just as he did when he handed Will that first Ripper file. Jack sees Will clock Hannibal, and says:

"Look, I know Alana Bloom wants to keep you separated during this investigation, but I don't have any more time to play go-between with the two of you. I need my consultants consulting together, not apart. You have sessions three times a week, right? So you're not telling me you don't know how to talk to Hannibal Lecter civilly when you need to. Well, now you're gonna need to. Can you do it? Be honest with me here, Will. Can you, or can you not, work with Hannibal?"

Beverly's eyes find Will's for the barest second. Without hesitation, Will says: "I can work with him."

"And you can work with Will?" Jack asks Hannibal.

"It would be my honor."

They look at each other, Hannibal warmly, Will as chilly as it gets.

Jack watches them both, apparently evaluating their sincerity. Will is a little afraid Jack is going to make them do something intolerable like shake hands, but Jack only says, "Good. That's good. So it's water under the bridge then. Let's get back to work."

Will does as he is told. He returns to his verbal reconstruction of the Gabrielle Buchanan murder. In many ways, her death was standard for a Ripper victim. It included all the telltale indicators: organ removal, mutilation, arrangement of the body post-mortem, with the one added quirk of the exsanguination. The Ripper drained her blood into the swimming pool by

slashing deeply into her forearms and thighs. She died from this blood loss, not from the earlier surgery.

It is a heady thing, making these pronouncements about Gabrielle Buchanan's killer in full knowledge that the man himself is listening to every word Will says.

"She died slowly. Out in the open. Just a six-foot high fence between her and the neighbors. The Ripper was certain he wouldn't be interrupted, but he knew he could escape detection if necessary. His confidence is reaching critical mass. It's tipping over into arrogance, and arrogance has the potential to blind."

Jack crosses his arms, looking thoughtful. "You think the Ripper could be pushed into making a mistake?"

Will glances at Hannibal, who is watching this conversation with his eyebrows raised. "Maybe," Will says.

"The Ripper isn't known for making mistakes," says Zeller.

"Everyone makes mistakes," Hannibal says, uninflected.

"So you agree with Will?" Jack asks him. "You think the Ripper can be pushed?"

"We know he can be pushed," Hannibal says. "Abel Gideon and Freddie Lounds were able to push him in the past. The Ripper has an ego. If it were bruised, he might be driven to act, and act rashly."

How strange to listen to Hannibal make such blithe pronouncements about himself. Will is forever being reminded of what a good actor Hannibal is, of the impregnability of his disguise. Will's own playacting feels flimsy in comparison.

Beverly looks uncomfortable. "Just so I'm clear," she says, "we're talking about baiting a serial killer into killing again?"

Jack shakes his head at her. "Come on, Beverly. He'll kill again regardless of whether we're baiting him. But if we bait him, maybe he'll get sloppy. Leave us some evidence for a change. Get himself spotted. Maybe even get himself caught."

Beverly presses her lips together. Says nothing. Will shoots her a pacifying look. He asks Jack, "How are you suggesting we bait him?"

"I'm not suggesting anything yet," Jack says. "Depends on whether the Ripper's through with killing for now. What do you think?" He looks between Will and Hannibal. "Has he closed the window yet? You think the cycle's over?"

Hannibal and Will stay silent. Each is waiting for the other to answer.

Finally Hannibal says: "I think the matter inconclusive. I see nothing in Mrs. Buchanan's murder to indicate the Ripper's true intentions."

Will makes an uncertain noise. Hannibal turns to him. “You believe otherwise?”

“I suspect otherwise.”

“Don’t play coy with us, Will,” Jack says. “Is the window open or is it shut?”

Hannibal looks at Will, his gaze opaque, benign, but the challenge underneath it is plain enough to Will. *Tell me what I’m thinking. Go ahead and try.*

Will is almost unaware of his mouth moving, but it does move, and suddenly the word “Open,” hangs heavy in the air between them. Hannibal’s eyelids slide incrementally.

“Why ‘open’?” Jack asks.

“It’s just a feeling.” Will can’t exactly tell Jack that he has seen the answer in Hannibal’s eyes. “Before, I said it felt like the Ripper was gearing up for something. Well, I think he’s still gearing.”

“All right,” Jack says, rubbing at his chin. “We’ll keep local and state police on high alert for the next week, put extra people on the tip lines. I’m worried you’re right, Will, but damned if I’m hoping you’re wrong.”

“I hope I’m wrong too,” Will says, directly to Hannibal.

They break so that Jack can get on a conference call with the rest of the Ripper Taskforce. Zeller and Price both wander off to make some calls of their own, checking in with local PD and the BAU forensics lab. Hannibal excuses himself on account of “an appointment,” the vagueness of which Will would normally find to be a cause for concern, but right now he is just glad to have a moment alone with Beverly. She comes right up to the bars of his cell and clutches them tightly.

“Hey,” she says.

“Hey.”

“You ok?”

“Better now,” Will says, smiling.

“Did he have you poisoned?”

Will smiles wider; he knows how long Beverly has been bottling this question. “Not exactly.”

And he gives her the low down on what happened to him two nights previously. Although Will does his best to make it make sense, his story is still checkered with blackouts and confusion. Beverly listens, looking more and more stupefied by the awfulness of it. As he watches her, Will finds himself regretting telling her the whole truth. He thought he wanted to

share it with someone, but re-experiencing the horror secondhand through Beverly is hard for him to take.

By the end, she is gripping the bars so tightly her fingers are shaking. “Will. *Will*. That is so many kinds of wrong. Like, crimes against humanity wrong. We have to get you out of here before Lecter tries to use you as a guinea pig for any more experiments.”

“I’m staying right where I am,” Will says calmly. “I have something on Chilton now, so if he knows what’s good for him—and trust me, he does—he’ll leave me alone. I should be pretty safe here from now on, all things considered.”

“None of us is safe,” mutters Beverly.

“I’ve found out some things since last we talked,” Will says. “I have some names. Arthur Rimes. R-I-M-E-S. And Mason Verger. Can you find out if either of them has a connection to Dr. Lecter?”

“Ok. Where are these coming from?”

“Bedelia du Maurier.”

Beverly looks surprised. “Lecter’s psychiatrist?”

“She came to see me.”

“Wow. I looked her up back when Jack first asked me to screen Lecter. She’s a strange lady. I thought she was an agoraphobe.”

“I think she is. But it didn’t stop her from giving me those names. I can’t say I’ve gotten a handle on du Maurier, Bev. She might not be ready to betray Dr. Lecter’s trust. So whatever you find, take it with a grain of salt for now, ok?”

“Sure. Salt taken.”

“Also,” Will says, “he’s a cannibal.”

She blinks at him, understandably blindsided. “Who’s a cannibal?”

He actually smiles a little. “Dr. Lecter.”

Beverly’s face contorts. Her eyebrows dance and her lower lip twists sideways. “Wait. What? Will—*what*?”

“The surgical trophies: they’re not lined up in his basement, preserved in Mason jars. He’s eating them.”

Beverly’s mouth is working, but no sound comes out. Finally she manages: “Like Hobbs?”

Will immediately shakes his head. “Nothing like Hobbs. Hobbs ate his victims to honor them, as a way of showing his respect. He wanted to keep some small part of them inside himself.

It's the opposite for Dr. Lecter. He eats his victims because it's the only thing they're good for. He's an apex predator. At the top of the food chain. He doesn't prey exclusively on the weak—he preys on everyone he deems unworthy."

"Part of the humiliation," Beverly says, in a hushed voice.

"Yes. And no. You haven't seen his food, Bev. He puts so much work into it; it's like art. It's just like the crime scenes. Immaculate. Precise. Beautiful. It's a transfiguration, what he does. You could call it a makeover. The uncouth becoming haute cuisine. He thinks he's doing his victims a favor, serving them up with style."

Her mouth is open. "How do you *know* this?"

This is a hard question to answer. "I don't remember how I know it," he says. "But it doesn't change the fact I do."

"But… he could have told you this *himself,* while you were drugged!"

Will doubts that Hannibal would have been so unsubtle as to actually volunteer this information, but he says, "Maybe," because his memory is a tangle and anything is possible.

Beverly frowns, and crosses her arms tightly over her chest. "How can you be certain this is true, if you don't know where it's coming from?"

"I know it's true," Will says flatly. "It explains everything. Think about those dinner parties. You saw the pattern there. He throws one during every Ripper cycle. It isn't just a cover. He's destroying evidence."

"Wait. Wait, wait." A new horror has dawned on Beverly. "So he isn't just consuming the organs himself? He's feeding them to other people?"

"Yes."

"Without their knowledge?"

Will finds himself wanting to smile again, and has a hard time forcing the feeling away. "He thinks he's being amusing, turning all these civilized people into cannibals."

"Whoa," says Beverly, waving her hands. "Whoa, whoa whoa, wait a minute, Will. Jack's been to dinner with this guy."

"Uh huh. So have I."

She makes a sound between a rasp and a scream. "Oh my God!"

"I'm trying not to think about it," says Will, staring at his feet.

"How can you *not*?"

He says nothing for a long time. He is very aware of Beverly staring at him like he's some kind of monster by association. And in a way that's exactly what he is. Without really thinking about what he's going to say, he begins to speak.

"One of the first times I met Dr. Lecter, we were working the Hobbs case together in Minnesota. He came to my hotel room, knocked on the door at about six in the morning. I was still half asleep, so I was pretty confused to see him standing there. He talked his way into my room, made himself comfortable, and then he revealed that he had brought me breakfast. These little Tupperware containers full of scrambled eggs and sausage. He had carted them with him all the way from Baltimore. At the time, I thought it was strange, I thought *he* was strange, that he would go to all this trouble just to make me breakfast. He didn't know me. He wasn't even my psychiatrist yet. But I dismissed it, because a lot of things about Dr. Lecter were strange, and what did I know about *strange*, anyway? I could tell the food meant something to him. So I just let it go. I ate his breakfast. I told him it was delicious. And, you know, it was."

Beverly reaches through the bars and grabs his hand.

"He brought it right to my door," Will continues, voice choked. "He needed to make sure I ate it. It must have been the first thing on his to-do list when he met me. I don't think I understand *why* yet. I'm not sure I want to understand."

"You don't have to understand it, Will." Beverly's eyes are bright. "That's the thing. You don't have to understand *everything* about Lecter in order to catch him."

He smiles painfully. "It would help, though." And then, "I'm worried about who was in that Tupperware, Bev."

"Ok," she says, nodding a little frantically. "Ok. I understand why you don't want to think about this stuff. You can stop now."

"I'm worried it was Cassie Boyle in there."

"Stop thinking about it. All right? Stop."

He nods. She squeezes his hand.

She says: "Concentrate on what we have to do and how we're going to do it. This changes things for us. You probably already know that. I thought we would have hard evidence to find, trophies from all of his kills hidden away somewhere. But what if it's all gone? What if he's *eaten* all of it?"

"He hasn't," says Will. "He's got a real taste for it. He makes it last. Look at Miriam Lass. He kept that arm for years. We don't know what happened to the rest of her. And we don't know what happened to Abigail."

"So, you're saying he has a freezer full of human remains?"

"It's possible. Even probable, yeah."

“Great,” says Beverly, with a slightly hysterical sigh. “So we just have to raid his fridge.”

Will smiles in spite of himself. “Easy peasy.”

“We’ll figure this out,” she says. “We know what he wants now. We’re one step away from knowing how he works. And he doesn’t know how much you know, right? He thinks you’ve forgotten. Let’s keep it that way. We can get ahead of him, Will. We work together on this and we can shut this fucker down.”

She really does make it sound easy. Will squeezes her hand one more time, before letting go.

Suddenly Beverly’s lips contort into a strange smile. “Hannibal… the Cannibal.”

“Yeah,” he says. “How about that.”

By the time Jack and the other agents return to the corridor, Will and Beverly have recovered themselves. Bev goes back to trading pool-related puns with Zeller and Price, as Zeller takes them through a slideshow of crime scene photos that he displays on the corridor wall with a portable projector. Price, having dusted the entirety of the tiled terrace surrounding the swimming pool, reviews with them the various partial prints he has collected and their respective owners. The few latent prints that remain unidentified probably belong either to a friend or to a pool cleaner. All in all, it’s a disheartening presentation.

Things get worse when Jack says, “We may need to bring Freddie Lounds into this again.”

“No,” says Will, before the words are fully out of Jack’s mouth.

“Obviously you won’t be the one talking to her, Will. That would lead to a story none of us want to read. But somebody’s gotta talk to her. We know the Ripper reads TattleCrime.com. The easiest way to poke him is through that website. You want to stroke his ego—Freddie Lounds can do that for us. She’s already been doing it twenty-four seven since the Ripper started ripping again.”

Will hates this idea more than he can say. “You can’t control Freddie Lounds, Jack. This will get away from you. How can any story she prints actually drive the Ripper into making a mistake?”

“How about we give her a lead,” Jack says. “Let her think we have someone in our sights. Someone completely different from your profile. Say, someone with a history of violence, sexual abuse, maybe a serial rapist. Someone who would offend the Ripper’s high opinion of himself. We ruffle his feathers, plus if we get him to think we’re chasing a bad lead, he may take more chances. He’ll think he’s safe.”

Will thinks this is Jack’s desperation talking. Normally he’d tell Jack what a foolhardy plan this is, but why should he bother? Will knows the Chesapeake Ripper isn’t getting his

information from TattleCrime any more—he is getting it straight from the investigation, and has been for some time. But Jack can't know that.

So Will just shrugs. "You want to get in bed with Freddie Lounds again, be my guest. But there is no guarantee that this is going to make any difference to the Ripper. I think he's smart enough to spot a plant."

"Hmm," says Jack. He is already wedded to his plan, and Will's lack of support grates on him. "I'll ask Hannibal what he thinks when he gets back. How about that?"

"Knock yourself out," grumbles Will.

Jack doesn't have long to wait. Hannibal returns to the hospital an hour later, and he has brought something along with him. There is a large insulated carryall strapped over his shoulder. Will spots it immediately and thinks, *oh shit.*

Jack sees it, too. His eyes light up. "What do we have here?"

"Investigative work is a hungry business." Hannibal places the bag on one of the folding chairs and begins unzipping it.

Barney, who has escorted Hannibal down the corridor, says, "Why don't I get you a card table, Dr. Lecter?"

"Thank you, Barney; that would be helpful."

Hannibal folds back the top flap, and a meaty smell immediately permeates the corridor. "Mmmhmm," says Jack. "Hannibal, you shouldn't have."

Only now does Beverly realize what is happening—she blinks as if someone has just dazzled her with ten thousand watts. Will keeps his own face completely blank as Hannibal turns to look at him.

"I know you have been having difficulty stomaching the meals this institution provides for you, so I took the liberty of preparing you a little something myself."

"Thoughtful of you," Will says, his voice bone dry.

Hannibal inclines his head. Then he picks up one of the food containers and pries off the lid. "Beef bourguignon with winter mushrooms. Simple and fortifying." He gestures with the container, indicating that Will should reach through the bars for it.

Over Hannibal's shoulder, Beverly throws Will a look of pure panic. Will betrays nothing in his expression, though inside he is a tempest. He made this happen. Somehow he compelled Hannibal to do this. The remembrance of those little Tupperwares has weighed so heavy on his mind, and now Hannibal has recreated that meal on a larger scale. It is like Hannibal has a

direct line into Will's subconscious, so that he can take note of Will's nightmares and re-enact them in his waking life.

Will's hand is numb as he reaches for the container. He half-expects Hannibal to use this opportunity for another surreptitious caress, but Hannibal passes off the food without touching him.

"Thank you," Will says.

"My pleasure," says Hannibal.

Barney comes back with the card table and Hannibal begins doling out stew into a set of neat ceramic dishes. "Ladies first," he says, handing one off to Beverly. "I know you expressed some skepticism regarding my cooking, Miss Katz, but I think this dish will come as a pleasant surprise."

"I bet," says Beverly, voice hoarse.

"You're in for an unexpected treat, Bev," says Jack, smiling widely. "Once you've tasted Hannibal's cooking, you'll never be the same."

This is the first smile Will has seen on Jack's face in weeks, and it kills him that Hannibal's food is what put it there.

Beverly manages to smile back, just barely. Hannibal gives out stew to Price and Zeller, and then he says, "Barney, I insist you have some, too. For all the good work you do here."

Barney looks a little uncertain, but Hannibal is already handing him a dish. "Well, thank you very much, Dr. Lecter," he says. "Sure smells good."

"Thank you," says Hannibal, and then, with a little bow, "Bon appétit."

Everyone begins eating. Everyone except Will and Beverly. And then there is Hannibal, ever the graceful host, even when not on his home turf. He watches them patiently, waiting for everyone to partake before he allows himself a bite. A Mexican standoff over French cuisine.

Sounds of forks scraping ceramic, the slosh of broth, teeth working against tender meat.

"God, this is good," says Zeller.

"Puts Mom's beef stroganoff to shame," says Price.

Will and Beverly look at each other. They are going to have to start eating soon, otherwise it will look strange. Will can see the panic just below the surface of Bev's poker face. He wills her to keep it together, even as Jack smacks his lips and says, "Hannibal, this is magnificent. How do you do it?"

"There is a secret ingredient," says Hannibal. "But if I told you, I would have to kill you."

Jack lets out a cackle. Will stares at the floor as a scream lodges thick and wet in his throat.

Hannibal leans toward Jack and says, *sotto voce*, “Dark chocolate. Thickens the sauce and adds to the richness of its color.”

“Aah,” says Jack. “Would never have guessed that! What’s the matter, Beverly? Aren’t you hungry?”

“Uh,” says Beverly. “No, I am, I’m just…enjoying the smell! Mmm.”

It’s now or never. Will picks up his fork. He gives her a long, bolstering look. *Come on, Bev*, he thinks. *We can get through this.*

She settles back in her chair, pulls her hair behind her ears, and picks up her fork, too.

Will spears a chunk of meat. So does Beverly.

Will raises the fork to his lips. So does Beverly.

Will takes the meat into his mouth and begins chewing. So does Beverly.

Will swallows. Beverly stands up, and with her mouth still full, she speaks in a voice just shy of steady. “Excuse me, I just have to…” and then she walks up the corridor as fast as she can without running. The orderlies roll back the gate for her and she is gone.

A moment of shock. Then Zeller chuckles. “What’s her problem?”

“I’m sure it had nothing to do with the food,” Jack says, with maximum politeness, to Hannibal.

“A good chef knows his output will never be to everyone’s taste,” Hannibal says, dipping his head. Then his neck swivels and suddenly he is looking at Will. His dark eyes are glimmering, almost fever bright, but his expression is mild. Polite surprise, with a little disappointment.

Will doesn’t know what possesses him. All he knows is that he has to distract Hannibal from Beverly’s hasty exit. Make Hannibal pay for so effortlessly outmaneuvering them. But really he just wants to get a rise out of the other man, any way he can, even if it’s petulant and infantile and stupid.

Without even pausing for breath, he begins gobbling down Hannibal’s beef bourguignon. Every swallow is so thick, so forced, that it’s bordering on a choke, but he just pushes himself and pushes himself, chewing through soft potato and juicy onion and moist meat. All of it, down the hatch. He wishes he could say that the speed with which he’s eating takes away from the food’s taste—but the fact remains that he can taste every bite, and it is scrumptious. He prays he won’t throw it all back up, and is gratified when his stomach remains steady through this torturous process. With one final swallow, he cleans his container. He throws down his fork with a clatter, crosses his arms, and then looks up to see that everyone is staring at him.

“I was hungry,” he mutters, shrugging.

Hannibal is smiling now, a true smile, as if he's trying not to laugh. He shakes his head at Will. *Tsk tsk, whatever shall I do with you?*

After everyone is finished, the team takes a break. Jack has more phone calls to make. Zeller and Price go off in search of Beverly. Hannibal lags behind to clean up the meal. He spoon Beverly's almost untouched stew back into the lidded container, and replaces it in his carryall. Then he steps up to the bars to take Will's empty carton.

"Did you enjoy the meal?" he asks.

"Could have used more salt," Will says.

Hannibal smiles indulgently. "Perhaps that was Miss Katz's complaint."

"Perhaps," says Will, a growl in his voice.

Hannibal cants his head like a lizard. "I suspect you may have mentioned my cooking to her, Will."

Will glares. "Jack's the one who talks up your cooking, Dr. Lecter, not me."

They stare at each other. There is violence simmering between them.

Hannibal says, "I am glad to see you bouncing back after your overdose. It seems you have an enviable constitution, if you have managed to retain some memory of what happened to you."

"Who says I've retained anything?"

"Dr. Chilton," says Hannibal, eyes glittering again. "He is under the impression that you remember everything from the night of your, ah, 'poisoning'."

"I don't know what gave him that idea."

"Dr. Chilton is worried you blame him for what happened."

"I do blame him," Will says. "But not as much as I blame you."

Hannibal raises his eyebrows ever so slightly. "You are right to blame Dr. Chilton. He had a responsibility towards you, one he did not manage to fulfill."

"You're the one he let down, Dr. Lecter." Will smirks. "How pissed are you, right now?"

"I am very disappointed in Dr. Chilton," says Hannibal. "I cannot deny that. But I deal with disappointment the same way I always have."

"How's that?"

Hannibal looks cheerful. "Menu planning."

Will can't stop himself from reacting to this, which makes Hannibal smile wider. Will puts his poker face back on, and approaches the bars, chin jutted.

"You make a puppet, you can't get angry when someone else grabs hold of the strings."

Hannibal gives him a long approving look. "I suppose not," he says. He takes a step towards the bars, too. "Then you won't mind, Will, if I take a turn with *your* puppet, some day."

"I don't have a puppet," Will spits back.

"Don't you?" Hannibal steps away, zips his carryall. "Please tell Miss Katz I hope she feels better, when next you two have a chat."

Beverly comes back on her own, with her shoulders hunched and her hands in her pockets. She looks ashamed of herself.

"Ok," she says, "I know that was bad."

"It's ok—" Will says, but she interrupts.

"No, it isn't. I freaked out. I couldn't stop myself. Just the smell of it, Will. I thought I was going to hurl. And that would have been worse, right? If I'd actually thrown up."

Beverly is talking very fast. Maybe it's Will's imagination, but he thinks she still looks a little green.

"Bev—" But she interrupts again.

"I don't know how you did it. That took… I'm sorry, I can't think of a word that isn't 'guts'. I can't believe you ate it. You actually ate it. How did you do that? I don't understand."

"*Beverly*," says Will—but she keeps on talking.

"Was it easier because you'd already eaten some? You know what, don't answer that. I really don't want to know. But the good news is we now have this. Check it out!"

She takes her hand out of her pocket. She is holding a little plastic baggie with a half-masticated gobbet of meat inside it.

"Hard evidence! I'm driving back to the lab right now—first thing tomorrow, I'll have a full workup. We'll know exactly what, or who, this is."

She is beaming with accomplishment. Will cringes.

"Beverly," he says, finally able to get a word in. "It wasn't human remains."

Her smile fades. "How can you know that?"

“Because he wouldn’t risk serving evidence of his crimes to a team of FBI agents, some of who might already know his secret. What you have there, it isn’t human, Bev. He was bluffing.”

Beverly won’t back down. “You called his bluff, but you can’t *know* it’s a bluff. Not for certain. And you still ate it. I can’t believe you actually ate it, not knowing what it was. You’re so confident you can predict him, but how can you know *anything* for sure?”

“It wasn’t human, Bev,” Will says calmly. “He wanted to see how much I knew. And how much I had told you. Your reaction told him everything he needed to know.”

She nods sadly. “So much for the element of surprise.”

“We’ll deal with it. It was only a matter of time before he figured it out.”

Beverly looks down at the baggie and fingers it thoughtfully. “I’m still gonna run the test.”

He nods. “Go ahead. But it isn’t human.”

“Yeah, yeah. We’ll see.” She pockets the sample and turns to go.

“Beverly!” She turns back to him. “He knows you’re helping me,” Will says. “Please be careful.”

She nods. It isn’t his imagination—she is definitely a little green.

The next morning she comes back safe and sound, though looking very sleepless, to inform Will of the test results.

“Well, you were right. It’s not human remains.”

“Told you,” says Will.

“But it’s not beef, either.”

“What?”

Beverly hisses at him: “It’s seitan. Seitan. Do you know what seitan is? It’s gluten, Will. This guy served us gluten, told us it was beef, knowing we’d think it was human. What. The. Fuck. The man is insane. And—are you—are you laughing? *Why are you laughing*?”

Will has to wipe away tears, he’s laughing so hard.

Beverly clenches her jaw and her eyes flash in warning. “This isn’t a joke, Will.”

“I’m sorry, Beverly,” Will wheezes, “*but that’s exactly what it is*.”

Chapter 18

Chapter Summary

Beverly conducts some reconnaissance.

Alana comes to see him that evening. It's not her normal visiting hour, or her normal visiting appearance, for that matter. Her hair is swept into a shining bun, her makeup darker, and beneath her buttoned trench, Will sees the glint of a black beaded dress shorter than her usual numbers. She looks very beautiful. Will wants her to take the coat off. He wants to see the full effect. He despises himself for wanting this, so he keeps his eyes locked on a spot of concrete just to the left of her stilettos.

"Going somewhere nice?" he mutters, as she draws up a chair.

She evades, which is an answer in itself. "I tried to see you earlier, but Jack's team was here. I didn't want to interrupt."

"You didn't want to talk to Jack," Will corrects her.

"Not particularly, no." She swallows. "So you noticed I've been harboring some…anger, where Jack is concerned."

"Hard to miss, what with you screaming at him yesterday."

She cringes a little. "Not my finest moment. I was worried about you." She leans forward, trying to read his shuttered face. "How are you, Will? How are you, really?"

He shrugs.

"I'm going to get you out of this hospital as soon as I can, ok? I've spoken with Nigella, and with the District Attorney's office—it won't happen before the trial, but I'm going to make sure they don't place you back here. You might have to be transferred out of state, but I've made some calls and—"

"That all sounds fine, Alana, thanks." Will is busy watching the beads gleaming above her knees.

She sighs. Presses her lips together. She tries so hard to make things better for him, and he doesn't even want to hear about it.

Will feels ashamed of himself. "Sorry. I guess I don't really want to talk business."

"You could have died," she says quietly. "That is not business, Will. That's your life."

"Well, I didn't die, so… no harm done."

The silence between them limps on and on, mortally wounded.

Alana suddenly stands up, pulls the chair as close to the bars as she can, and sits back down. "You aren't the only one who has their priorities backward," she says. "Since you've been institutionalized, I have tried, first and foremost, to be your ally. Your defender. But I think I have been so intent on fighting for you, that somewhere along the line I began fighting *you*. In making myself your champion, I've forgotten how to be your friend. I'm sorry."

Her words surprise him. Pain lances behind his eyes.

She opens her purse. "A peace offering." She slides through the bars a flat wrapped package crowned with a little silver bow.

"You—you don't have to do that," Will says, very uncomfortable. "I don't want you to do that."

"Just take the gift," she says, with a lurching smile.

"Thanks." He is careful not to touch her hands as she gives it to him. Instead of tearing at the wrapping paper, he picks off the tape and unfolds the delicate edges of the paper across his lap. It's a book, an anthology of Flannery O'Connor stories. He begins laughing to himself, almost silently.

Her eyebrows draw together.

"Sorry," he says, "It's just." He stands up and goes to his desk, plucks up his own Flannery O'Connor anthology. "Same edition and everything."

"Oh," she says, and she laughs, too. Lifts her hand to her face as if trying to nudge the laugh back inside.

The tension between them relaxes, like a spent breath.

"How many books do you have in there?" she asks.

"Four." He chuckles. "You know my taste, that's for sure."

"It was between her and Raymond Chandler. I was worried O'Connor would be too dark."

Will raises his eyebrows. "Too dark for *me*? Are you kidding?"

She smiles warmly. Extends one hand. “I’ll take it back for Chandler.”

“No,” says Will. “Have my copy. We’ll trade.”

Alana shakes her head. “What’s the point—”

“I want to keep your gift. Take mine. Please.”

Alana accepts the book. This time their fingers brush for a microsecond. Both of them pretend not to notice.

She turns the anthology over in her hands. “Is this from the hospital library?”

Will holds a finger to his lips. “Shhh.”

She smiles wider. He smiles back.

“I requested it,” he tells her, “because I remembered how you read O’Connor to Abigail when she was in the hospital. I think about that a lot, how I woke up from a nightmare to the sound of your voice. Sometimes I lie on my cot, just at the threshold of sleep, and I think I can still hear you reading. I find it… uh… comforting, I guess.”

She is watching him with wide, listening eyes. “I read to you, too, you know. When you were in the hospital.”

He stares at her. “I didn’t know that.”

“Well,” she says, with a rueful smile, “they were keeping you unconscious.”

He wishes he remembered this. He wishes her voice had filtered down to whatever dark place he had been living in. He forgets, all the time, how many gaps there are in the telling of his own story: how much he still doesn’t know, how much he has missed, how much he may never get back.

“O’Connor?” he asks quietly.

“Dumas. *The Count of Monte Cristo*. Another of my favorites growing up. It’s better in French, but I thought that might confuse you.”

“You speak French?”

She tosses her head. “*Je parle assez bien*. I spent my junior year of college in Rouen.”

“Another thing I didn’t know.”

Will looks at her: this elegant, beautifully dressed woman who loves literature and speaks French. Easy to see what Hannibal likes about her. Hannibal must speak French, too. Didn’t he once say he was educated in Paris? Will wonders if he and Alana speak French to each other. Whether they whisper it together in the dark. With a surge of mental violence, he obliterates this line of thought.

He clears his throat. “Isn’t *Count of Monte Cristo* a thousand pages long?”

“I—uh,”—she looks down at her hands—“I visited you a lot, while you were under. I knew I couldn’t read the whole thing, but I wanted to see how far we’d make it before you woke up.”

“You like doing that,” he says, lips twitching. “Biting off more than you can chew.”

“Impossible projects.” She nods. “I do have a history.”

“I’m not impossible.”

“Oh, I know you’re not.” She offers him a tentative smile. “You’re just a tricky case.”

“I’m improbable,” Will says. Then, because he cannot stop himself, “Hannibal Lecter, on the other hand…”

There goes Alana’s smile. “It would be best if we didn’t talk about him.”

“You’re right,” he says. “Bad idea. Sorry.”

The silence returns, that throbbing sense of injury. Unable to look at Alana, Will stares down at the book in his lap. He doesn’t see her face when she suddenly says:

“He’s not impossible. But he’s hard to reach, sometimes. Everyone has their moods, but he can be particularly… distant. If I’m being honest, I often feel like I’m having a conversation with only a part of him. The part of him he wants me to see.”

Will doesn’t trust himself to speak.

Alana looks at him, hard. “The funny thing is… I come out of conversations with you feeling the same way. The exact same way. As though I’ve been talking to your shadow. It has all of your mannerisms, your personality, but none of your spirit. Like the real Will is off somewhere else, hiding from me.”

Will’s throat is locked. “Do you feel that way now?” he manages.

She shakes her head. “Not now.”

He nods slowly. When he speaks, he has to dredge his language up from someplace deep.

“I’m not hiding from you. And neither is Dr. Lecter. He doesn’t have to hide, Alana. Because the truth of it is, you aren’t looking. Not really. You see only what you want to see.”

She opens her mouth to argue, but before she can respond, the orderlies pull back the corridor gate.

A cheerful voice calls: “Oh, hey!”

Alana composes herself in a flash. “Hello, Beverly. Did something happen in your investigation?”

“No, this is just a social call. I come bearing Thai food. But I can give you more time if you’re in the middle of something.”

Alana throws Will an awkward look and stands up. “It’s fine. I should go.”

Beverly walks down the corridor into view. “Wow,” she says. “You look amazing. Look at those shoes! Where are you off to, a royal wedding?”

“Um.” Alana is leery of discussing this in front of Will. “The opera.”

Beverly smiles, eyebrows raised. “Classy. I didn’t realize you were into that kind of thing.”

Alana smiles uncomfortably. “I’m not, really. But my friend loves it, so I’m learning to like it for his sake. I’m certainly partial to the dressing-up aspect of it.”

“Plus champagne at intermission,” says Beverly.

Alana’s smile turns warmer. “There are two intermissions tonight, so…”

“That’s a lot of champagne!” Beverly chuckles. “The opera. Wow. Is your friend Richard Gere from *Pretty Woman*?”

Alana lets out an amused huff. “You know, he kind of is.” Looking a tad embarrassed, she says, “It’s Hannibal, actually.”

The smile congeals on Beverly’s face. “Oh.” Her eyes flash to Will, as if checking with him if she has heard this right. “I didn’t realize you two were….”

“We’re old friends,” Alana says, evading.

“Gotcha.” Thankfully Beverly’s smile has returned to something approaching genuine. “Well, that sounds really nice. Have a great time.”

“Thanks,” says Alana. “Enjoy your night. See you soon, Will.”

“Bye,” he says.

She puts his copy of Flannery O’Connor in her bag, and walks away. A flash of beads from her evening dress as she disappears from view.

Beverly’s smile drops off her face. She rounds on him. “Will, what the fuck?”

He just grimaces.

She slashes one arm in the direction of the gate. “How long has *that* been going on?”

“I can’t know for certain. But… a while.”

Her mouth falls open. “And you haven’t said anything?”

“I knew you wouldn’t like it.”

“Not to me, you idiot. Why haven’t you said anything to *her*?”

“I tried,” he says, miserably.

Beverly rolls her shoulders in fury. “Try. Harder.”

“It’s complicated.”

“Seriously? *Seriously*? ‘It’s complicated’? That’s your defense? What is wrong with you!? Will—*friends don’t let friends date serial killers*. Simple as that!” She shakes her head. “This is insane. I have to go talk to her.” And she actually takes a step to follow Alana.

Will reaches through the bars and grabs her arm. “No, you don't. Beverly, listen to me. You say anything to her, you make her doubt him even for a second, and you’re putting her life in danger. You’re putting *your* life in danger. You have to leave her alone. Alana is safer where she is.”

Beverly leans in and enunciates in his face: “She is having sex with a serial killer. With a cannibal. How is that *safe*?”

Beverly’s policy of total honesty has never been more mortifying. Will increases his grip on her arm.

“He cares about her. She matters to him, and not many people do. He won’t hurt her, unless he feels like he’s being *forced* to hurt her. So we cannot force him. We stay away. Beverly, do you understand me?”

Slowly her determined expression crumples. “No,” she says, in a hoarse voice. “No, Will, I do not understand you. My understanding encompasses exactly none of this. But I’ll keep out of it, if that’s what you want me to do.”

That’s as clear as the coast is going to get. Will releases her arm.

Beverly uses her freed hand to rub her face. Behind it she looks pale, more sleepless than ever. “Just when I thought things couldn’t get any weirder,” she says.

“I’m sorry.”

“This is so messed up, Will. So messed up.”

“I know.”

“I thought…” Beverly takes her hand away from her face. “I thought there was something going on between Alana and *you*. I always saw a spark there.”

“Um,” says Will. “You’re not wrong. I mean, there was something. Maybe there still is, I don’t know.” He tries to summon the energy to tell Beverly the whole story. “I kissed her once, right when I was beginning to feel pretty sick. She did the smart thing and turned me down. I was gutted. I made the mistake of telling Dr. Lecter about it, and… yeah. I guess that’s how we reached this point.”

“I’m sorry,” Bev says, with feeling. “That really sucks. You think he’s doing this to get at you?”

“Of course he is.” Will considers showing Beverly the drawing he still has stashed underneath his mattress, but he thinks better of it. Wouldn’t want to push Bev over the edge. “But like I said, it’s more than that. He has feelings for her. Whatever passes for feelings with him. I don’t like thinking about any of it. I try not to. Because when I do, it’s hard for me to stop…” He shakes his head. “Like I said. Complicated.”

“You’re telling me.” Beverly sighs and determinedly changes the subject. “I looked into those names you gave me. Verger and Rimes. They were both patients of Lecter’s. Though Verger hardly counts as a patient; they had a couple of sessions together about a month before his accident. Court ordered, on account of Verger getting written up for indecent exposure. But Lecter is still the psychiatrist for Verger’s sister Margot, so there’s definitely a connection to the family.”

“Could Dr. Lecter have been at Verger’s house the night of his accident?” Will asks.

Beverly shrugs. “There’s no evidence he was. I don’t know if Lecter has an alibi for that night. Knowing him, he probably does. If Verger ever wakes up from his coma and accuses Lecter, that would make our lives a whole lot easier.”

“It explains why Dr. Lecter is still seeing the sister,” Will says. “He’s trying to convince her to pull the plug on her brother’s life support.”

Beverly nods thoughtfully. “Arthur Rimes; now he was Lecter’s patient for a couple of years. Violent schizophrenic with a history of stalking and obsessive behavior. Lecter put him on some experimental medication that ultimately turned out to be less effective, before referring him to Dr. du Maurier.”

“What was his given reason for referring Rimes?”

“Apparently Rimes found out Lecter’s home address and showed up there one too many times. Switching psychiatrists did nothing to curb Rimes. He attacked du Maurier during their second session together, and in the midst of the attack, he asphyxiated. Choked on his tongue. The coroner thought he’d had a seizure brought on by those experimental meds. That seizure saved du Maurier’s life.”

Will takes this in. “So we have one former patient of Dr. Lecter’s who attacks a woman and swallows his own tongue. We have another who carves up his own face and feeds it to his dogs. In both cases, psychotropic agents were blamed for what happened.”

“You think Lecter put Rimes on that drug, knowing it would drive him into a psychotic episode?” Beverly asks.

“Bedelia du Maurier made it clear that she believed Dr. Lecter was involved in whatever happened to her. He is very close with du Maurier. And he likes putting people close to him in dangerous situations. *Binds* them even closer to him, you see. He wants to be as close as possible.”

Beverly's eyebrows are in her hairline, but she is nodding.

"And we know how persuasive he is," Will says, "especially when talking to someone who has been mentally compromised."

"Ok, now you lost me."

"Beverly, Dr. Lecter didn't just give Rimes that drug. He persuaded Rimes to attack du Maurier. And when things started to look bad for her, he cleaned up his mess the only way he could without incriminating himself: he *talked* Rimes into swallowing his tongue."

"Whoa. You're saying Lecter was there when du Maurier was attacked?"

"He didn't want her dead," says Will. "He wanted her indebted to him. Dependent on him. He would have had to be there to make sure things turned out his way."

"Ok," she says, frowning. "But how do you convince someone to swallow their own tongue?"

Will shrugs. "Same way you convince someone to cut off their own face. Or swallow a severed ear."

Beverly's eyes go very wide. "You think he talked you into doing that *yourself*?"

Will nods. "I'm almost certain of it." And he plows forward, trying to ignore the arrested way she is staring at him. "I trusted him, and by that point I had completely lost my grip on what was real. He probably drugged me, same way he and Chilton tried to drug me a few days ago. This is a pattern, Bev. This is repeated behavior. He manipulates his patients. Violent patients, especially. He uses medication to tear down their boundaries, erase their inhibitions, get them suggestible, and then he sees just how far he can push them."

"Then there might be others!" Beverly says. "Other patients he's tried this stuff on."

"I wouldn't be surprised."

"I wish we could subpoena his patient records. It must be a goldmine."

"We can't get a subpoena without him and Jack finding out about it." Will shakes his head. And then it hits him. "Two intermissions. How long an opera is that?"

Beverly blinks at him. "Four or five hours, I guess."

"We know where he'll be," Will says. "And for how long. A good chunk of time." He inspects her closely. "What are you doing tonight?"

Beverly begins to smile. "Well, I don't know. Eating some dinner. Watching some TV. Breaking into Hannibal Lecter's murder palace. The usual."

Will is happy they're on the same page. "You won't have time to search both his office and his home. We have to prioritize."

“You think he’s got a lot of security on his office?” Beverly asks. “A lot of doctor’s offices are pretty loaded up.”

“He has alarm systems on both his office and his home, but I’ve never seen him arm either of them. When he’s home, he doesn’t even lock his door. He isn’t worried about protecting himself from intruders.”

“Why should he be? It’s the intruders who need protecting from him. But if he has incriminating evidence in either his office or his home, I bet he’d be pretty careful to protect *that*.”

Will nods. “Try them both. Home and office. They’re near each other. See which you can get into without triggering an alarm. He can’t find out you were there, Beverly. So don’t disturb anything, and don’t take anything with you. Just bring your phone and take as many pictures as you can.”

“If I get into his home,” Beverly says, “then I can raid his fridge like we talked about.”

“I said, don’t take anything.”

“Not even a sample?”

Will shakes his head. “Photos only.”

“We can’t prove he’s eating human flesh with a photo, Will.”

“This isn’t about gathering proof. This is about gathering intelligence. We need to know whether he keeps anything related to his murders on his property. If you can’t find the evidence itself, at least narrow down the places where he could be hiding it. Anyway, he knows we know about the cannibalism. I’m betting you won’t find anything resembling human remains in his refrigerator. You’re welcome to look, though, as long as you don’t take any of it with you.”

He gives her a long, level look.

“You have to play it safe, Bev. Promise me. Get in. Take as many photos as you can. And get out. He’s very careful in his own spaces. He has them memorized down to the smallest detail. If something changes, even if it seems like something inconsequential, he’s gonna notice.”

“Ok,” Beverly says. “I’ll take photos as soon as I’m inside; that way I can be sure I leave everything exactly as I found it.”

“Good. And Beverly?”

“Yeah?”

“Bring your gun.”

She rolls her eyes. “You think? I’m only trespassing in the lair of a serial killer here. I’d bring a rocket launcher if I could.” She hands him the bag full of Thai food. “Guess I don’t have

time for dinner, huh?"

"Sorry."

"Too bad. It's all vegetarian."

Will smiles. "No seitan, though?"

"Shut up," she says, smiling back. "It's tofu." And then, "Just so we're clear, you owe me big time for this."

"Don't I know it."

"Good. Then I guess I'll see you later."

She turns around and swaggers off, looking like she's heading out for a drink rather than embarking on a string of burglaries. He watches her, so terrifically impressed by her coolness under pressure. But her confidence is exactly what frightens him. She underestimates their enemy. This misapprehension gives her leeway to take risks. She thinks Hannibal is garden-variety, a serial killer with a basement full of evidence from which she can just nab a sample and run off to the authorities. She thinks Hannibal Lecter is a cliché, a known quantity. That kind of thinking will get her killed.

Will drops the bag of Thai food on his desk. He paces back and forth, unable to settle, unable to do much of anything. His fingernails hover at his lips, his resolution not to bite them fraying by the second. It's going to be a long night.

The ward is peaceful, the other inmates unusually lethargic, trapped inside their illnesses, their pasts, their minds. Will is trapped, too. Not just trapped in this cell, but trapped inside the cage of his own fears. His imagination is the most sadistic jailer he could ask for. All night long it paints him endless scenarios in vivid Technicolor: Beverly with a knit cap pulled over her hair, the high beams of a squad car shining in her face as she stands on Hannibal Lecter's manicured lawn and fields questions from the officers; Beverly hiding in the hall closet adjoining Hannibal Lecter's front room, crouched and wide-eyed, listening to the sounds of Hannibal and Alana returning home having left the opera early; Beverly going through the papers on Hannibal Lecter's desk, sliding things into her messenger bag even though she promised Will she wouldn't; Beverly creeping up the staircase in Hannibal Lecter's house, startled by a car backfiring and whipping out her gun; Beverly paging through journals on the second floor of Hannibal Lecter's office, not noticing the quiet noises of shoeless feet on the ladder as someone climbs up after her; Beverly walking with a flashlight through Hannibal Lecter's dining room, and a hand stretches out from underneath the table and grabs her by the shin; Beverly lit by the open refrigerator, so compelled by its contents that she doesn't feel the knife until it slides into her kidney; Beverly bleeding on Hannibal Lecter's bedroom floor, and Will is the only person who even knows where she is; Beverly's labored breaths slowly waning until all is silent in Hannibal Lecter's dark house.

He bites his nails, but the thoughts won't stop.

Hannibal wouldn't do it. He wouldn't give himself away. Alana might be there, and he would never do anything in front of Alana. He doesn't want to see the look on her face. The horror. The end of the illusion. If he finds Beverly, he will call the police. He will report her, act the part of the outraged citizen whose privacy has been unlawfully invaded by the feds. That's what he'll do. That's all he'll do.

But even seeing the thing from Hannibal's perspective doesn't allow Will to relax. He still feels like he has sent Beverly into a situation he hasn't prepared her to handle. He remembers how Hannibal called Beverly a puppet, and a poisonous sweat breaks out all over Will's body. He has proved Hannibal right.

If only he had access to a phone. He could talk Beverly through this, beat by beat, obstacle by obstacle. He could help. He could be there with her, knowing exactly what she's doing and whether she is safe. Why hadn't he thought to ask about a phone? They could have found a way to smuggle one into his cell. They rushed into this thing, they leaped without looking. If this backfires, they won't just be back where they started: they'll be completely fucked.

He tastes copper again. He has made himself bleed.

The sounds of Barney's slow footsteps. He is making his first rounds of the morning.

"You ok, Mr. Graham?"

"Fine," Will says, from a thousand miles away.

"You sleep all right?"

"Yes." He hasn't slept.

"Mmhm," says Barney, skeptically, and continues on his rounds.

A little after nine, Beverly appears in the corridor, with her hair a little more rumpled than usual but otherwise looking completely normal. Will makes a noise without meaning to.

"Somebody's happy to see me," she says, sauntering over. Her casualness is maddening.

"What happened?" Will asks, too loudly. "Are you ok?"

"I am *fine*, Will. But you're not. You look horrible. Did you sleep at all?"

"We should have thought it over more. Planned it out. Stayed connected. I should have tried to get a phone in here." He is speaking very quickly. "What was I thinking, just sending you

in? I could have talked you through it. You were all alone in there. What was I thinking?"

Beverly grips the bars. He is pacing too far away for her to touch him. "Will, take a breath and look at me. Look at me. See? I'm fine. It went fine."

He does as she says and some of his skittishness leaves him. "Uugh," he says, rubbing his face.

"The phone would've been a great idea, if only to keep you from driving yourself nuts. And I didn't have a lot of time, so I bet you could have pointed me in the direction of the places where I should have been concentrating my efforts."

"Tell me everything," he says.

"The alarm in his office was armed, so no luck there. But I got into his house through the sliding doors off his dining room. They were *unlocked*." She hands him her phone. "I took photos of everything. Knock yourself out."

He scrolls through them as Beverly looks on. It's a thorough reconnaissance. She has photographed every room in Hannibal Lecter's house, even the three bathrooms and the eight closets. She has taken almost fifty photos of just the inside of his refrigerator.

"You went a little wild here, Bev."

"He has a *lot* of meat in there. Enough to feed thirty people, which makes sense if he's about to throw a dinner party. It's all carefully packaged, vacuum-sealed. I mean, yeah, it might all be filet mignon, but come on. It was all just sitting there, mocking me."

"I'm sorry," Will says. "You'll get a crack at that fridge some day, Beverly, I promise. What's this?"

"What does it look like? A bottle of ketchup. I couldn't believe he owned one! Sorry."

"And this?"

He has stopped on a photo of a frosted glass door, lit from behind with dark outlines of bottles within.

"Walk-in wine cooler," she says. "Freaking enormous, it must hold a hundred bottles. I took a photo because the door was locked, which I thought was kind of strange. But he has some pretty old vintages in there, so maybe he's just worried someone will accidentally drink one of his three-hundred dollar bottles of Château d'Yquem."

Will scrolls through photos of the pantry, two storage closets, and the dining room.

"Look what I found above the fireplace," Beverly says, pointing at the screen. "Behind this awful painting he's got—what is that swan *doing*?—there's a hidden safe, see?"

Will stops on a photo. He sees that Beverly has removed the painting from the wall, revealing the safe behind it. A little steel rectangle with a heavy-duty lock.

“Probably for documents,” he says.

“Yeah, he couldn’t fit anything bigger than a thymus in there. But still. If he’s taking small mementos from his victims—hair, teeth, tissue, like what he used to make the fishing lures—could fit in there without a problem.”

Will nods thoughtfully. He scrolls through the photos of the second floor of Hannibal’s house, until he reaches Hannibal’s home office, a room he didn’t even know existed. It looks like a miniaturized version of his consultation office—even the desk looks similar.

“Two of the drawers were locked,” Bev tells him. “Heavy duty locks too; I couldn’t pick them. So add those to our list of locked doors.”

Will stops on a photograph of a photograph.

“I found that wedged between the pages of an atlas,” Beverly says. “That’s the only personal photo I found in his whole house. Can you believe that?”

Will says nothing. He is transfixed. The photograph is an old 3 x 5.5, black and white, but so faded it is now gray and yellow. The solemn face of a child stares out at him from underneath a mop of rigidly straight straw-colored hair. The eyes are deep-set, dark and expressionless. The sharp little fingers are curled tightly around a gatepost.

“Leave it to Lecter,” Beverly says, shaking her head, “his most treasured possession is a childhood photograph of himself.”

“It isn’t him,” Will says quietly.

“What? It looks just like him!”

“It’s a little girl.”

“No!” Beverly snatches back her phone. “Oh my God, you’re right. He ever mention having a sister?”

“No,” says Will. He motions for her to give him back the phone. He zooms in on the face of that little girl who looks so much like Hannibal, and not just physically; her uncanny stare suggests a kinship deeper than that. Will slips this image away inside his mind, as if concealing a weapon.

He scrolls through photos of the various papers on Hannibal Lecter’s home desk. Most of them are bills and bank statements.

“He is *loaded*,” Bev whistles. “Who knew psychiatry paid so well? Aaah, here we go, the mother lode.”

Will has landed on a photo of a bill from a storage company.

“Cold storage,” he says.

“He rents a unit from a facility out in West York, Pennsylvania. Fifteen-by-twenty-four feet, a massive space. It’s temperature controlled, super discreet, with twenty-four hour security. Basically it’s for wealthy people who need a place to stash their art, but I’m betting that’s not what he’s using it for.”

“That’s a safe bet,” Will breathes. “Beverly, this is amazing. We have to get in there.”

“I’ll look into it,” she says. “The way I see things, if we’re looking for a place where he could store a body, frozen and intact, this has got to be our number one option. His house doesn’t have a basement or a cellar. Unless he has a secret room concealed behind a wall somewhere, there’s just no place for him to hide a corpse. Theoretically he could stow some smaller parts in the wall safe or behind the wine bottles in the cooler—but this cold storage unit makes much more sense, don’t you think?”

Will nods. “You did really well, Bev,” he says, earnestly. “Really well.”

“Thanks. I won’t pretend I wasn’t terrified. Wandering around in the dark, I almost Maced some Greek bust thinking it was him.”

“But you left everything exactly as you found it?”

“Yeah,” she says. “I promise you, I did. We’re in the clear.”

She leaves him to return to Quantico. But she comes back that afternoon with the BAU team, and Hannibal. Jack gives Will a briefing on the state of affairs concerning the Chesapeake Ripper, and passes him an iPad through the bars.

“What’s this?” Will asks, even though he sees the TattleCrime banner.

“Freddie Lounds ran our story.”

Will scans this ‘insider’s look’ at the Ripper investigation, biting his lips as he reads. It’s just as Jack wanted it: Freddie Lounds claims the Ripper taskforce is concentrating its resources on looking into the medical backgrounds of former sex offenders.

“Kind of crude, don’t you think?” Will says, handing it back.

Jack ignores this comment. He looks pretty excited. “Major news media have been picking up the story all morning. I think this really does have a shot at drawing him out.”

“Hmm.” Will leans against the bars. “What do you think of all this?” he asks Hannibal.

“The article?” Hannibal asks, innocently. “I cannot say I agree with Miss Lounds’s journalistic ethics, but there is no denying she knows how to wield her pen.”

“You think she’s poked the Ripper?” Will asks.

“Possibly. We know the Chesapeake Ripper values his reputation; I have based my whole profile around that fact. If he believes he has been slighted, he may lose his temper and relax his control.”

“The Ripper never loses control,” Will says, shaking his head.

“We will have to see about that,” says Hannibal, “won’t we?”

They finish the briefing. Jack and company prepare to return to Quantico. Meanwhile Hannibal remains in his chair, waiting for the others to leave so he can begin his session with Will. Beverly steps around Hannibal in order to pick up her shoulder bag, and he says, “A lovely scent you’re wearing. Magnolia and honeysuckle, with a little tartness underneath. Burberry, is it not?”

Beverly straightens without picking up her bag—the set of her shoulders is tense, startled, but the rest of her is as relaxed as always.

“Um, yeah. I must have gone a little overboard this morning, huh?”

“Not at all,” says Hannibal. “The effect is very subtle. But I have a sensitive nose.”

“Now, you know you’re underselling yourself,” Jack says to him, before turning to Beverly. “He’s gotta be part bloodhound. Guessing perfume is his favorite trick, and I’ve never seen him get it wrong.”

“Oook,” says Beverly, looking a little put off. “Well, I’m sure that must drive the ladies wild. Excuse me for a sec.” She leans over him and grabs her bag.

“It’s a very appropriate choice for you,” Hannibal says, in an undertone. “Very distinctive.”

“Thanks,” says Beverly. “Glad you appreciate it.” She throws Will a pointed *what the fuck* look, and walks off with Price and Zeller.

Jack lingers for one minute more. “I’m happy to have you both on this,” he says to Will and Hannibal. “The two of you, consulting together. You’ve got contrasting styles, but they’re complementary. It’s working out.” He directs this next at Will, with careful emphasis. “Don’t you think so?”

Will smiles in such a way that permits only Hannibal to see the sarcasm. “I think we make a great team.”

Jack nods. “This is an exceptional taskforce, best ever assembled. I think we have a shot at catching him this time, I really do.”

“I hope you’re right, Jack,” says Will.

“As do I,” says Hannibal.

Jack walks away, looking cautiously hopeful.

Hannibal and Will turn back to each other—they have both been looking after Jack almost pityingly.

“Strange isn’t it,” says Hannibal, “how someone can see so much, and yet see nothing at all?”

“He senses he’s close to the Ripper,” Will says. “He’s not wrong.”

Hannibal is silent for a long time. Then he says, “That is quite a distinctive scent Miss Katz favors. A little too bold for my tastes. What do you think of it?”

Will is unnerved by Hannibal’s sudden obsession with the way Beverly smells. “I don’t care what kind of perfume she wears.”

“You should,” Hannibal says. “Because, as I’ve said, it is very distinctive. Rather disconcerting to come across such a distinctive scent in my own kitchen. I wonder how it got there. Perhaps you’d care to enlighten me?”

Chapter 19

Chapter Summary

The Chesapeake Ripper goes on a spree.

"Ok," says Beverly, as she clenches and unclenches her fists, "so on a scale from one to ten, how much does he want to eat me right now?"

Will gives it some thought. "Four?"

She stops her pacing and stares. "Fuck."

"He doesn't want to eat you, Beverly."

"Then why did you say *four*?" She returns to pacing, fisting her hands as if squeezing invisible stress balls. "What did he say to you exactly? What does he know?"

"Just that you broke into his house last night and spent a lot of time in his kitchen."

"He doesn't know what I looked at, or what I found?"

"He seemed pretty confident there wasn't anything there for you to find. But he was bluffing again; I *know* he was bluffing."

Beverly is shaking her head. "I can't believe he'd just chat with you about it. 'Hey, I know you sent someone into my house last night looking for bodies!'" She gives him a strange look. "Is that what you do in therapy? You see him, what, three times a week? Do you really talk about this stuff *point-blank*?"

Will swallows uncomfortably. "Not point-blank, no. It's usually more…uh…" He grapples; there is no word strong enough to saddle the weight of his conversations with Hannibal. "…*implied.* That's how I know we really got to him. He was trying too hard to appear unconcerned. In reality, he's rattled. "

"Well, great. I'm so glad we succeeded in rattling the serial killer. One point to us."

"He won't hurt you," Will says, as forceful as he can. "He won't. He's too cautious for that. It would give the whole game away."

For once it's Bev who's having trouble meeting eyes. "The whole game…" she echoes, and clears her throat. "I just want to know where the line is, Will. When do I stop being an

annoyance to him and start becoming a liability? When does he say ‘to hell with it’ and bust out with the knives?”

“It’s not going to happen,” he insists. “Look, obviously you should take precautions. Don’t go anywhere without your gun. Might be a good idea to borrow some body armor from Tactical, too. But I’m telling you, you’re in no more danger today than you were yesterday.”

She heaves an ironic sigh. “That’s comforting.”

Will is losing patience, so he changes the subject. “Right now what worries me is that we’ve given Dr. Lecter a very good reason to get rid of whatever evidence he’s hiding. We have to make a move on his storage unit—sooner rather than later.”

Beverly nods. “I looked into that facility. Security is tight. I don’t think I’ll be able to talk my way in, at least, not without a warrant. If we’re going to get access to his unit without anyone hearing about it, then we’ll need to have his key.”

This is what Will was afraid of. He nods, shakily. “Ok. We get his key.”

Up go Beverly’s eyebrows. “Um… *how*? I didn’t see an extra when I searched his place. He must be carrying it with him. Ever noticed what he’s got on his key ring?”

Will nods. He has noticed just about everything when it comes to Hannibal. “Eight or nine keys. Normally he keeps it in his coat pocket, the right side.”

Beverly’s shoulders tighten. “Coat pocket,” she says. “Ok. I can work with coat pocket.”

An upswell of anxiety inside Will, but he doesn’t voice it. Bev looks so steady; he doesn’t want to shake her confidence or his own. “Here’s what you do. Pay a visit to West York. Rent a unit there.” He quickly adds, “I’ll, uh, pay you back, some day. You get your own key and you switch it out with his. Do it right and he won’t notice anything’s amiss.”

The set of Beverly’s shoulders is tighter than ever. “It’s the ‘doing it right’ part that concerns me,” she says, mouth angling uncertainly. “Pickpocketing the serial killer. Could get ugly.”

Will can only nod.

Things do get ugly—sooner than they thought.

It starts that night, just before lights out, when Will hears a commotion beyond the outer gate. The shrill, put-upon voice of Kevin, the night orderly.

“I can’t let you in there. Visiting hours are over. You’ll disturb the patients!”

“The patients are already disturbed!” Unmistakably Jack. "You got questions, you call Dr. Chilton. He guaranteed me access to my consultant any time I need him. And I need him *now*."

Kevin is a lot less accommodating than Barney, but of course it's only a matter of time before he buckles under the relentlessness of Jack. A few minutes pass, then Kevin appears in the corridor, flanked by two guards. They bypass the leg shackles, but they handcuff Will tightly before escorting him from his cell.

"What's going on?" Will asks, but Kevin doesn't answer, too busy nursing his bruised ego.

They take him to the Coffee Room, where Jack is waiting, phone pressed to his ear.

"Jack?" Will asks, as Kevin all but pushes him down into a chair and fastens his cuffs to the table tie.

Jack hangs up the phone. He is vibrating with grim impatience, so much so that Will knows what he's going to say before he says it.

"We've got another body." And then, to Kevin, "He's gonna need his hands. I have to show him some pictures."

"Then show him," says Kevin, shrugging. "Patients past the orderly station must be restrained at all times. Hospital policy."

Jack hrrms angrily, but he has more important things to do than fight it out with the unpleasant orderly. Kevin sets the guards like sentries on either side of the doorway, and leaves the room still muttering injustice under his breath. Meanwhile Jack thrusts a stack of photos into Will's tightly cuffed hands. "Hispanic male found on a bench near the Baltimore waterfront about an hour ago."

Will studies the photographs. With his hands cuffed it is hard for him to flip between them. But he sees right away that this is a much messier crime than any of the Ripper murders. Like a bored child's discarded dolly this body has been cast absentmindedly sideways, the wooden slats of the park bench awash with blackish blood. Entrails have been torn from the man's slit abdomen and scattered on the sidewalk. The wounds are wild slashes, ragged stabs—nothing at all like Hannibal's surgical incisions.

"This can't be him," Will says quietly.

Jack points at one of the photos. "But there were organs removed. Intestines didn't get far, but his stomach's gone and there may be others missing too. I don't have a full rundown yet because Z's still with the body; the team's only been out there twenty minutes. I came straight to you. I need you on this right away if we're gonna make sense of this thing."

"Not sure a thing like this is ever gonna make sense." Will shuts his smarting eyes, wishing he had the mobility to rub them. It's late, and last night he was too busy agonizing over Bev's ongoing break-in to get any sleep. "I don't know what I can tell you, Jack. This is random. More brutish than brutal. The Ripper would never be this sloppy."

If Jack hears the distaste in Will's voice, the naked disappointment, he doesn't react to it. "But we wanted the Ripper to get sloppy. We wanted him to alter his pattern and start making mistakes."

Will shakes his head. "Look at the blood. This killer nicked arteries all over the place. The surgery was a rush job and he didn't bother arranging the body afterward. He just dumped it, parts and all." With an awkward jerk of his cuffed hands, Will pushes the photographs away. "This was thoughtless. Careless. There's no sophistication here. No wit. It isn't him, Jack. It just isn't him."

He's telling Jack what Jack doesn't want to admit he already knows. The lines around Jack's mouth deepen; he is trying to restrain himself from blaming the messenger.

"All right," he grumbles. He leans back in his chair and his mighty shoulders ratchet as he sighs, heavily. "All right, so we're dealing with somebody new. Who is he, then? Could he be a copycat?"

"If he's a copycat, then he's a bad one. This is a forgery of a Ripper murder. A shoddy knock-off." Will feels a future echo of the offense Hannibal will undoubtedly feel when he hears about this. "Who was the victim?" he asks.

"John Doe for now. We didn't find a wallet on him."

"The killer took his *wallet*? No way is this the Ripper."

Jack nods, finally allowing himself to be convinced. "Only thing we found in his pockets was a mirror."

It's an offhand remark, but it changes everything.

Will's voice is suddenly all tremors. "A *mirror*?"

"Yeah, a compact mirror. Plastic frame."

"Was the mirror broken?"

Jack's brow folds up. "No. What are you thinking, Will?"

Will is staring through Jack, beyond Jack, into the infinite distance.

"It's him," he whispers.

"Who?"

"The Chesapeake Ripper."

Jack's eyes narrow. "You just finished telling me how this couldn't be the Ripper."

"Yeah," says Will, absently, "well, I changed my mind."

"How does a pocket mirror lead you to the Ripper?"

Will doesn't answer. He stretches out his cuffs, drags the photos back towards him. Jack is asking more questions, but Will doesn't see the point of listening. He lets the pendulum

swing.

He is Hannibal Lecter and he is on a rampage. It is not a loss of control, but an act of will. He has decided to rampage; hence he rampages. There is no trigger, no instigation. He functions as his own catalyst for combustion. His default state of being is restrained violence, so when he removes the restraints, he becomes violence personified. He tears this man to pieces because he believes himself capable of tearing a man to pieces, and he always strives to put his own capabilities to the test. How he enjoys adding to his skillset, plying his trade, expanding. What starts off as a human being soon becomes, under his auspices, a fountain of blood. He kills his intended quickly, not out of mercy, but for expediency's sake. Quick and clean holds little appeal for him tonight. He would rather fast and messy. Fast and messy invites a little chaos into the equation, and a little chaos is exactly what he's after. He has more to do.

"Will, can you hear me?" Jack has raised his voice. "Will, talk to me. *Will*."

A swell of rage at Jack's braggadocio, his bullying insistence. Why talk to Jack when Jack lacks the ability to comprehend? Jack is only a small man playacting largeness. Jack is a meddler. An unapologetic trespasser on a sacred space he cannot fathom, to which he never shows the appropriate respect. Jack is an interloper, and there is no longer room in this covenant for three.

These thoughts are not strictly Hannibal's. These thoughts are not strictly Will's. These thoughts are the harmonic convergence of both men's rage. The emotions resonate and amplify and expand outward and outward, breaking every fort until Will is overwhelmed.

"*Why can't you just shut up and let me think*!" he growls, slamming his cuffs against the table. The room clangs like a gong. The guards jump to attention. Jack's eyes widen.

"Will," he says, in a voice pretty soft for Jack.

Will comes back to himself. He clamps down on the alien surge and squeezes his eyes shut. "Sorry," he mutters. "Sorry, I—I don't know what that was."

Jack lets it go with a dignified nod. "This killer's got you riled up. He's got me riled too. But that doesn't make him the Ripper, Will."

With his eyes still closed, Will whips his head back and forth. "No—no—it's the Ripper. I'm certain it's the Ripper."

Jack's voice is calm, neutral. "If this is the Ripper, then why is he killing this way? Why make all the mess?"

Will doesn't answer immediately. He is still taking back ownership of himself, untangling the threads of his personality from that silken knot of commingled emotion, separating the me from the we.

Finally he says, "He…he had to move on."

“You mean he was interrupted?”

Will shakes his head again. “If he were interrupted, the wound pattern would be different. He’d have started off deliberate and precise, and we would be able to see the exact moment when he had to abandon his usual methods. No: this was messy from start to finish. He went into this looking to kill quickly and haphazardly.”

“*Why*?”

It comes to Will, blooms full and rich inside his mind. “Time management,” he whispers, as his eyes slowly widen. “Jack… I think he’s on a spree.”

Jack blinks at him, uncomprehending. “A spree.”

“He’s gonna kill again. Tonight.”

“You think the Ripper’s on a *killing spree*?” Jack rubs his forehead. “One body doesn’t make a rampage, Will.”

“Well,” says Will, with a little shrug, “the night is young.”

Jack stares at him in something like horror.

Will doesn’t like being stared at that way, but at this point he’s gotten pretty used to it. “You wanted him drawn out, Jack. You wanted him enraged.”

Jack steeples his hands across his mouth. “You got all this,” he says slowly, “from a pocket mirror?”

Before Will can dodge this question, Jack’s phone rings. “You’ll want to answer that,” Will says.

Jack stares at him, dumbfounded, as he reaches blindly for the phone. “Crawford…. Yes… *When*? …”

Will registers on Jack’s face the exact instant when he is proven right. Body number two. Jack tells whoever is on the other end of the call to cordon off the crime scene and that the BAU is on its way.

He hangs up and directs a long, evaluating look at Will. “Baltimore PD found a body in a playground twenty minutes away from the waterfront. Male again, younger than the first victim. Head’s been almost hacked off and there are signs of surgery performed.”

He stands up, picks up his coat, eyes still running over Will as if Jack expects him at any second to make another prophecy, to channel the damned, to speak in tongues.

“I want you to stay on this,” he says. “I’ll send someone back as a liaison; keep you in the loop. If you’re right…” He shakes his head.

“I am right.”

"…then this has got to stop. We're catching the Ripper, Will. Tonight."

"Fine by me," says Will, softly. And as Jack turns to leave: "Why don't you call Dr. Lecter? If you can't have me out there—at least you can have him."

Jack glances at his wristwatch. He sighs. "Let Hannibal get some rest. I'll fill him in first thing in the morning."

"Something tells me he's awake…" says Will, but Jack is already out the door.

Will rolls his eyes at the ceiling. Just him and the two staring guards now. The cuffs issue a melancholy clink as they slide against the table tie. He doesn't even have the slack to lean back fully in his chair.

"I guess I'll just…wait here," he mutters.

A half hour passes as Will sits in the silent room, under guard and handcuffed to a table. Meanwhile Jack hunts the Ripper as the Ripper hunts mankind. A whole half hour in which Hannibal could be slicing and dicing his way across the Chesapeake Bay, and what can Will do about it? Not a goddamned thing. He wishes Jack had at least left him with more information on the second victim; that murder remains an unrealized blur. Will is certain the killing methods will be similar: a bloody rending of the body, precise only in its vicious imprecision. He knows there will be another pocket mirror on the scene. Hannibal's new calling card. His message to Will. *Are you watching? Are you seeing? I have only just begun.*

Why is Hannibal doing this? Will can't see his motivations plainly yet, but he tries and tries until his head is pounding on tempo with the pendulum. He can't bite his nails because, with his hands cuffed, he can only bring his fingers on level with his chin. Instead he grinds his nails against the table, and the places where he has bitten too far begin to throb as the wounds reopen. It soothes his nerves a fraction.

Finally a knock on the Coffee Room door. The guards open it, revealing Dr. Chilton, puffy-eyed and tousle-haired, a sports coat flung over his silk pajama top.

"I don't appreciate being summoned," he says as he harrumphs his way into the room.

"I know *I* didn't summon you." Will doesn't exactly have fond memories of late night meetings with Dr. Chilton.

Slapping his briefcase down on the table, Chilton lowers himself into the chair across from Will. "This arrangement you have with the FBI is beginning to interfere with the day-to-day operations of my hospital. Or should that be night-to-night?" He yawns. "I am not Jack Crawford's errand boy and I'm certainly not your babysitter. I am under no obligation to facilitate these consultations."

"But we couldn't do it without you, Doctor," says Will. "As you're just *so good* at aiding and abetting."

Which stops Chilton's whining in its tracks.

They sit in airless silence until Chilton's phone rings. "You've reached Dr. Frederick Chilton," he says. "Yes, I'm with him now. All right, give me a moment."

He puts the phone on the table between them and switches it to speaker mode.

"Will, we may have something here," Jack says.

Will leans forward as much as he is able. "What do you mean?"

Beverly's voice bursts on to the line. "Hair! I found a clutch of hair in Victim Two's left fist."

"Probably tore it off the Ripper's scalp," says Jack, voice thrumming with excitement. "He's gone and done it, Will. This time he left evidence behind him."

A heavy weight descends on Will, pressing down on his temples, on his throat, on his throbbing fingers. "No…" he says, "No… he wouldn't do that…"

"Well he did!" crows Jack. "Couldn't have been more than thirty minutes between him dumping the first body at the waterfront and him nearly beheading the second victim here. He hasn't even given himself time to cool off, let alone clean up his crime scenes. He left forensic evidence behind him, Will. Just like we needed him to. Beverly is taking it back to Quantico; she'll try to expedite the lab work. Before the night is over we should have something for a VICAP search."

"Maybe I'll have something for you sooner than that," says Bev, and Will knows she is thinking of the DNA she took from Hannibal Lecter, her so-called 'elimination samples', safe and stowed in the BAU lab, ready to be matched with this hair sample.

"I don't know," says Will, more to her than to Jack.

"What don't you know?" asks Jack.

"This is just too easy. The Ripper on a platter. Gift wrapped."

"Now, don't go looking the gift horse in the mouth!" Jack says. "We wanted the Ripper to make a mistake. Well, he made one. And if he keeps going like this, he's gonna make a whole lot more of them."

"But that's just it! It's what you wanted to the letter, Jack. The Ripper is granting you your wish. Almost like he heard you." Again, he is directing this more to Beverly than Jack. She has some idea now of the way Hannibal works, the tricks he plays. Nothing here is what it seems.

Even Jack must be leery of accepting his good fortune at first glance, because with disbelief heavy in his voice, he asks Will: "You think that Freddie Lounds article really drove him to do this?"

"I don't know," says Will, because he can't say 'no' outright.

"*Something* must have driven him to this," says Beverly, and Will understands by her emphasis that 'something' means 'you and me.'

"Yes," he says, in answer. "Something did."

"You said before he was gearing up, escalating," Jack says. "Is this what he was gearing up for?"

"The big finish," says Will, softly. "Looks like it."

Jack takes a long, galvanizing breath. "If he wants to pull out all the stops, then so can we. I'm sending out a memo now. Every law enforcement agency in Baltimore County is putting people on the streets tonight. He can't run off the leash if we give him nowhere clear to run. We're stopping this spree in its tracks, Will. We catch him, we match him to that hair, and the Ripper rips no more."

"He has at least a half hour head start on you," Will warns. "You don't know where he'll be, Jack, and you can't have eyes on every street."

"I can try," Jack declares.

On the other end of the line, the warbled burr of a helicopter's rotor. Bev's ride back to Quantico. Jack begins barking orders, sending Beverly on her way.

"The second you have anything, you call me—"

"Jack," Will shouts, over the roar of the chase, "Jack, listen to me. I want Dr. Lecter on this. Can you get him?"

Dr. Chilton, who has been listening with increasing eagerness to this conversation, now looks at Will in sharp confusion.

"What do I need Hannibal Lecter for?" Jack asks, distractedly. "I have half the Bureau here and I have you in there. Unless Hannibal Lecter has some way to expedite the extraction of DNA from a hair sample, I don't see a reason why I should wake him up."

"Because I am asking you to," says Will, patience fraying.

"Will, if you need a psychiatrist, I already sent you one; he's sitting right across from you."

"I don't need a psychiatrist," Will spits. "I need Dr. Lecter. You want me to give insight into how the Ripper's doing this? Where he'll strike next? *Then you send me Hannibal Lecter*."

"All right," says Jack, clearly eager to get off the phone. "I'll call him."

"Thank you."

Jack terminates the call. Chilton is staring at Will.

"Why are you so eager to talk to Dr. Lecter?" he asks.

Will has no patience for Dr. Chilton right now; he shrugs aggressively.

“I would have thought,” says Chilton, “after—ah—what happened…” He shakes his head and starts over. “I assumed you had something against him, that’s all.”

Will just stares at him from out of the tops of his eyes, which Chilton seems to find unnerving.

“It’s just that I’m—ah—*glad*! Glad that you can put it all behind you. Water under the bridge. After all, everything Dr. Lecter has done has been in the service of your rehabilitation. Your recovery. I’m glad you are able to understand that. Forgive and forget, eh?”

“Oh, Doctor,” Will says, in a grave voice. “I don’t forget. And I’ll never forgive.”

Chilton’s expression falls and he glances, just once, at the guards.

While Beverly returns to Quantico and Jack summons a small army of Ripper hunters to patrol the greater Baltimore area, Will sits in the Coffee Room with his terrified babysitter Dr. Chilton, waiting for the phone to ring. Jack sends Chilton photos from the second crime scene, which Chilton loads on his tablet (“It’s top of the line,” he says, warningly, to Will as he hands it to him, and winces as Will’s scabbed hands swipe at the screen) and Will constructs this second brutal killing inside his mind.

There is even more blood this time; a red impasto slathered down the playground slide. The young man is covered in stab wounds, both deep and surface. No swath of skin remains unmarked. Some of the cuts resemble the ravening scratches of an animal. This man was *mauled*. Hannibal killed this victim here, on the playground, which represents a change from the first murder: that body he dumped on the park bench, having killed his victim elsewhere. So Hannibal is adjusting his approach as he careens on his bloody way. This wild spree is not so wild after all. There is deliberation here, sober and clinical decision-making. Hannibal is simply disguising method to look like madness. Why?

Will needs him here. Will needs to look into his eyes and understand. If Will can understand the truth behind these actions, he can begin to predict them. And if he can predict them, he can reverse this trap and snare its maker.

Chilton watches him with skittering eyes as Will worries at his bleeding fingers.

At one-thirty in the morning, a night watchmen turns up a third body at a construction site in Westport. Jack has the area canvassed, but no one has noticed any strange activity, neither a speeding car nor an out-of-control serial killer. Jack’s nonchalance begins to fade as a fourth body is found on the top level of a Catonsville parking garage, a woman with her eyes and tongue cut out.

“He’s getting further and further away from the Baltimore city center, Will. Any idea where he’s going?”

"No."

Jack says nothing for a moment. Will can hear his frustration mounting, like air in the metal stomach of a bellows, pressurized and roaring for release.

"*Why is he doing this*?" Jack bursts out.

"I don't know," says Will, quietly.

Dr. Chilton, who has become more and more invested in the case as the night wears on, clears his throat. "A killing spree is usually the work of desperation. A killer who believes himself to be almost out of time is more prone to committing sustained and repeated acts of violence in a futile attempt to regain control of his circumstances, and of himself. He may believe that you are close to catching him; hence the spree. He sees it as his last opportunity to dispatch as many innocent victims as possible before he surrenders his freedom."

Jack is not impressed. "But we're not close to him. Not close enough. I'm the one who's running out of time here. I'm running out of manpower, and I've got Freddie Lounds liveblogging me every step of the way. She turned up at the third crime scene with a *video crew*. She's spreading misinformation, calling this investigation a wild goose chase; it's sabotage. I need something here, *Will*." Jack, trying to discourage Dr. Chilton from any more unsolicited editorializing. "I can't just wait for the forensics to come through. Tell me something about the Ripper, something new. There's gotta be a pattern here. He takes their wallets—*why*?"

"Makes it harder for you to identify the victims," Will says. "He wants you confused. He wants you operating on as little information as possible. That's why you can't expect much from that hair sample."

"We found prints on the fourth victim. Jimmy lifted three of them from a silver bangle on the victim's wrist."

"More forensic evidence? Come on." Will shakes his head, even though Jack can't see it. "Those prints are not the Ripper's."

"They *could* be the Ripper's."

"They're not," Will says, flatly. "You know he's capable of planting forensic evidence. He's done it before. He wants us to think these prints are his. I don't know why. You can't forget that it's always a performance with the Ripper. This time he is performing sloppiness, he's stage-managing a killing spree. But underneath the theatricality, he is as meticulous as ever."

"We found a compact mirror in the inner pocket of the victim's jacket," says Jack. There is something new in his voice, a faint accusatory note. "You say you can't see a pattern here, but I'm sure as hell seeing one with those mirrors. There's been one on every victim. You wanna tell me what they mean?"

"The Ripper doesn't want us to identify the bodies, but he wants us to identify *him*—his work. The mirror is his signature."

“No,” says Jack. “Organ removal is his signature. The organs have always been his signature. The mirrors are *new*. What’s their significance?”

“I can’t answer that, Jack,” says Will. It isn’t quite a lie. “Where is Dr. Lecter?”

“I spoke to him,” says Jack, impatiently, thinking that Will has changed the subject. “He’s on his way.”

At three forty-five, just after Jack and his spread-thin team have locked down the fifth crime scene in the Chesapeake Ripper’s killing spree, Hannibal Lecter walks into the Coffee Room. He actually has the audacity to appear a little quizzical, as if he can’t quite grasp the reason for his being pulled out of bed at this insane hour. And he really does look like someone who’s been recently asleep: he has traded his suit jacket and tie for a cashmere pullover, his hair is falling across his forehead uncombed, and he is holding a massive thermos of steaming coffee.

“Good morning,” he says, to Will and Chilton. “Or is it still ‘good night’?”

“I’m sorry you’ve been called out here at such an early hour, Doctor,” Chilton simpers, before adding “But Mr. Graham has been asking for you,” trying to deny all responsibility for inconveniencing Hannibal.

“You needn’t apologize,” says Hannibal, as the guards bring him a chair. He pulls it up next to Will and sits down. “It is the Chesapeake Ripper who is responsible for waking me. Perhaps by the end of the night, we shall exact an apology from him.”

“You sure you don’t have anywhere else to be?” Will asks, under his breath.

Hannibal is the picture of innocence. “There is no place I’d rather be than here, with you, in search of the Ripper. Besides…no rest for the wicked, eh?”

Chilton is the only one who laughs at this. And it is also Chilton who takes the lead in catching Hannibal up on the night’s events. Will watches this little scene with badly disguised amusement, as a cheerful Hannibal sips his coffee and listens to his own crimes poorly summarized by Dr. Chilton.

“Thank you for that, Doctor,” he says, when Chilton has finished. “I have slept through a great deal. You look like you might require some sleep yourself. Why don’t you lie down for a few minutes? I can hold the fort.”

Chilton doesn’t need an excuse to get away from Will. Before he leaves the room, he announces self-importantly that for the next half hour he can be found in his office should the guards need him and that they must wake him as soon as the next body is found.

Though he is very aware of the two guards still watching them, Will takes advantage of the semi-privacy Hannibal has secured for them and jumps right to business.

“If you’re here,” he hisses, “does that mean you’re finished?”

In answer, Hannibal blinks at him sleepily.

Will won’t be deflected. “*How are you doing this*?”

“The same way you are. Raw adrenaline—and this.” He pushes his coffee towards Will.

“You know that isn’t what I meant.”

Hannibal ignores this. His eyes are on the guards. Perhaps he is considering the possibility of sending both of them away for naps. “How long have you been handcuffed to this table, Will? You don’t look comfortable.”

“Let’s not talk about me. I want to talk about *you*.”

“What is there to say about me?” Hannibal’s eyes remain on the guards.

Will takes the hint. “The Chesapeake Ripper, then.”

“He is behaving very uncharacteristically,” observes Hannibal, idly.

“Not really. It’s just another performance, Doctor. A new role he’s chosen to inhabit.”

“Then you don’t believe Dr. Chilton’s theory that the Ripper may believe himself cornered by the FBI?”

Will answers by rolling his eyes.

“I see,” says Hannibal. “What is your theory, then? Why has the Chesapeake Ripper embarked on his, ah, ‘killing spree’?”

Will looks at Hannibal and understands that he is going to have to volunteer information if he hopes to receive any in return. “I think the spree is a diversion,” he says. “A misdirection. He wants the FBI to keep chasing its tail.”

“Interesting,” says Hannibal. Which—Will thinks—means yes. “So he is distracting the FBI, so that he might be free to pursue a hidden agenda. What agenda would that be?”

“I don’t know,” Will says. “Got any theories you’d like to share?”

“You’re the one with the theories, Will.” Hannibal gives an affected yawn. “I confess I’m still shedding sleep.” With a flourish of his wrist, he checks his Rolex. “I find your derision, where it concerns Dr. Chilton’s theory, unwarranted. His explanation of the Ripper’s motivations is less far-fetched than yours.”

“Give me a break,” says Will.

“Is it really so hard to believe this spree is the Ripper’s attempt to go out with a bang? Perhaps this is his final masterpiece. His Ninth Symphony.”

Will grinds his fingertips into the table with frustration—and Hannibal angles his head, nostrils flared.

“If you’re not going to help me,” Will says, “then you can go.”

“Can I?” And Hannibal actually stands up. “As you wish.”

“Sit down, Doctor,” Will growls.

The minutest of smiles as Hannibal retakes his seat.

“I want to role-play,” Will says.

Hannibal raises his eyebrows.

“If you won’t be the Chesapeake Ripper,” Will says, “then I will.”

He is sure this will present too tempting a prospect for Hannibal to reject, but Hannibal gently shakes his head. “This is not the appropriate time for therapeutic exercises, Will. We’re in the middle of a murder investigation.”

Will lets out a low growl. “Why are you *here* then?”

Hannibal watches him squirm. “Because you asked me to be. And Jack felt it might be of some help. The Ripper isn’t the only one behaving uncharacteristically. Jack is concerned about your behavior, too.”

“*My* behavior?”

“According to Jack, you have not been fully cooperating with the investigation. He suspects you are holding something back. Are you?”

“No.”

“You don’t tell Jack everything, Will. We both know that. You have been lying to him for a long time; I think he is finally becoming cognizant of that fact. Perhaps you are less committed to your chosen role than the Chesapeake Ripper is to his.”

“I can’t explain to him about the mirrors,” Will says. “I can’t explain to him the reason why the Chesapeake Ripper is going on this spree, because I know the reason is me.”

“How did you drive him into a killing spree?” Hannibal inquires, curiously.

“He must think I’ve found something that might expose him. Something in his house.”

Hannibal clicks his tongue. “A serious situation indeed. And *have* you? Found something?”

Will reflects Hannibal’s stare back at him. “You look a lot like your sister,” he says.

The bottom drops out of Hannibal’s eyes. He lunges forward—and Will thinks this is it, this is it, this is beyond the pale, he’s finally caught him, he has stripped away the mask and

Hannibal won't ever be able to put it on again, he will attack Will in full view of the guards and even Hannibal won't have a clever excuse to explain that away, but let him try, let him go ahead and try, oh Will is dying for him to try—but Hannibal checks the lunge a micro-instant later with an awe-inspiring outpouring of concentrated self-control, and he turns the movement, which he doesn't have time to reverse, into something mild and humane. He leans over solicitously and takes Will's hands.

If Hannibal had attacked him, Will would have sat there impassively and accepted his punishment. But now that Hannibal is showing him kindness, Will tries to pull away. The handcuffs won't let him go far. Hannibal tightens his hold, even as his touch remains gentle, feather-light. A surgeon's grip.

He clicks his tongue as he examines Will's hands. "Oh Will," he breathes. "What have you done?"

He angles Will's hands from side to side, leans in very close so that he might have a better view of the mutilated nail beds. They both watch as a bead of blood rolls down Will's left index finger. Will wants to use his abused fingers to scratch at Hannibal, he wants to take out his eyes, but his hands have stopped obeying his commands. He can't move them; they lie boneless in Hannibal's grip like two captured birds in delicate surrender.

"Your poor hands," says Hannibal softly.

"I'm fine," Will chokes. "It's fine."

Hannibal tsks at him. He looks up at the guards. "Do you have a first-aid kit? My patient has injured himself."

"We can treat him in the infirmary," one of the guards says.

"That won't be necessary. I am a doctor, I can see to this. I only require some disinfectant and a few small bandages."

The guards exchange a look and one of them leaves to fetch Hannibal his supplies.

Now it is just Will, Hannibal, and a single guard. Hannibal returns to his examination. He applies gentle pressure to the worst of the damage, and Will can't hide his flinch. Hannibal makes a soft noise, like a coo.

"Why must you insist on causing yourself harm? There are other ways of calming yourself, Will. Other methods by which you might control your situation. You don't need to do this. You must stop. Promise me you'll stop."

Will looks down at Hannibal's hands wrapped around his own, and thinks: these are the hands that have butchered five people tonight. They have sliced and rent and scored and gutted, they have yanked out a man's intestines like ribbons from a magician's top hat. These hands have been coated in gore five times over, fifty times over, and now here they are, clean and harmless and cradling Will's hands as if afraid to break them.

“Please let me go,” he says.

“Not until I’ve fixed you up,” Hannibal replies.

The guard returns with the bandages and Hannibal begins dressing the wounds, carefully and clinically.

Will recovers himself enough to whisper, in a hoarse voice: “What was her name?”

Hannibal’s hands remain steady as they work. “Mischa,” he says.

“How did she die?”

“In an accident. We were both very young.”

Will nods, his guesses confirmed. He looks up to see that Hannibal is watching him with penetrating eyes. “You mustn’t do that, Will. You are too clever to fall into that particular trap. You must realize that there exists no skeleton key you might plunder to unlock me. There is no deeper secret here. No explanation. You cannot explain me, any more than you can explain yourself.”

“Something happened to you,” says Will.

Hannibal shakes his head. “Nothing happened to me. I happened.”

As Hannibal applies the last bandage to his fingers, Will says: “You happened to me.”

Hannibal gives him a burning, arrested look before finally letting him go.

Chapter 20

Chapter Summary

Beverly puts her foot down.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

In the darkness, the pendulum swings.

The guards listen without comprehension as Will and Hannibal lapse into a conversation composed entirely of silences. Though they still speak occasionally—Hannibal asks Will questions about the crime scenes and the forensic evidence the Ripper left behind—the words couldn't be less important. Underneath them another interrogation pulses, one that flows in the opposite direction, as Will attempts to peel back the veil and make corporeal the ineffable motivations behind Hannibal's spree. As the pendulum swings faster and faster, a design emerges inside Will's mind, but he'll need further proofs before he can be certain he's right…

By the time Chilton returns to the Coffee Room, they have devolved into uninterrupted silence. Will is staring down at his chained and bandaged hands. Meanwhile Hannibal checks his Rolex for the sixth time (Will is counting).

"I see I haven't missed anything," Chilton says, pleased. "How long has it been since they found the fifth body?"

"Nearly an hour," answers Hannibal.

Chilton rolls his lip in thought. "Perhaps the Ripper is cooling off."

"That, or he has yet to develop the ability to bilocate," Will says, under his breath. Hannibal chances a half-glance at him but doesn't comment.

Just then the phone rings. Will stares at it intently, as if trying to answer it with his mind.

Hannibal picks it up before Chilton can even react. "Hello, Jack."

"Hannibal." Jack sounds distracted. "Good; you made it. Look, we have another body here, the sixth. A woman half submerged in Gwynn Falls stream. A lot of damage on this one.

She's unrecognizable. Chest cavity pried wide open."

Will barely hears the details. He is staring at Hannibal, and Hannibal is staring back. Another body and yet Will has had eyes on Hannibal for the past *hour*.

"How long had she been in the water?" Will asks.

"Couldn't have been long. Forensics is just looking at her now; we're pretty backed up here. Zeller's in Westport, Jimmy's still with Victim Five, all my best people are spread across the Baltimore metro area. Still waiting on those lab results from Beverly. I'm about to call her."

"I'll stay on the line." The quiet authority in Will's voice makes both psychiatrists look at him.

He can hear Jack raising his eyebrows. "You got something for me, Will?"

Hannibal angles his head, tranquil, only a touch inquisitive. Will returns his stare without blinking.

"Maybe," he says, "but I want to talk to Beverly first."

As Jack dials Beverly in, Hannibal and Chilton stare at Will, each of them trying with varying levels of success to peer into Will's eyes and understand what he is thinking.

Beverly joins the call. "Jack, there's something fishy going on with this lab work."

"What do you mean, fishy?" Jack asks.

"There were no DNA matches for that hair sample on VICAP, but I matched it somewhere else. It doesn't make a lot of sense, but get this—"

Will interrupts. "The hair is from one of the other victims."

A moment of silence. Beverly coughs in surprise, not having realized Will was on the call. "*Will*?"

"Bev."

"Thanks for stealing my thunder. How did you know?"

"Just a guess."

"Well, you're not gonna guess this next part. The hair we found in Victim Two's hand—it's a match with Victim *Four*."

"Now wait just a minute…" says Jack.

"That's curious," says Hannibal, who is cloaking a full smile.

"Is—is that Dr. Lecter?" Beverly asks.

“Hello, Agent Katz.”

“Uh, hi. You’re with Will?”

“I am.”

“Good.”

Meanwhile Jack is baffled. “But that doesn’t make sense. The Ripper killed Victim Four *after* Victim Two. How could Four’s hair get on Two? You’re telling me the Ripper planted hair from a woman he hadn’t even killed yet?”

“Beverly,” Will says, “did you run the prints off Victim Four’s bracelet?”

“Yeah, and I’m thinking you know where this is going. They’re an exact match with the ID prints Jimmy took from Victim One.”

“You’ve gotta be kidding me,” growls Jack.

“Curiouser and curiouser,” says Hannibal.

Chilton says, “Maybe all these people killed each other!” A suggestion everyone ignores.

Jack is at his wits’ end. “How is that even possible?”

“It’s possible,” says Will, with perfect calm, “because the Ripper isn’t killing these people in the order you’re finding them. Don’t you see, Jack? This spree—isn’t a spree.”

“But—” Jack groans. “Will, you’re the person who called this a spree to begin with!”

“Because it’s designed to look like a spree,” Will says. “It’s meant to stir us up until we’re at such a pitch we’re not seeing things straight. But this is as controlled and carefully planned as any of the Ripper’s other murders. He isn’t running amuck, dropping bodies in his wake. He is systematically planting corpses for us to find. He choreographed all of this in advance, like a—a scavenger hunt.”

Hannibal watches him make these pronouncements and one corner of his mouth darkens.

“Why?” Jack asks. “Why set all of this up?”

“I don’t know,” Will says, smoothly.

“But this can’t have all been a set-up,” Beverly says. “Come on; Victim Two was still *warm*. He was killed on that playground, the forensics confirm it.”

“That’s just the Ripper mixing things up, as always,” Will says. “Consistently inconsistent, remember? He killed Victim Two on site, but he could have killed the other victims hours ago, knowing the forensics wouldn’t be able to tell the difference, at least not right away. The Ripper’s aware of how long running lab work takes you; he knew that this influx of bodies in this short of a time frame would overload you. He’s bought himself a lot of time, Jack, at

your expense. He knew you'd scramble after those DNA samples, that you'd waste man-hours collecting and testing them, leaving him free to…"

"To do *what*?" Jack barks.

"I don't know." Will throws a forceful look at Hannibal, demanding input.

And Hannibal complies. "The Ripper planted these bodies like a trail of breadcrumbs, leading you further and further away from Baltimore."

Will raises his eyebrows, slowly, unsurprised.

"You think he's planning something back in Baltimore?" Jack asks.

"Perhaps," says Hannibal.

"Count on it," says Will.

"What's he planning?"

Will and Hannibal look at each other.

"I don't know." The softest taunt hidden underneath Will's words.

Jack is running out of patience. "Will, you've been saying that to me a lot lately."

"I've been saying it because it's true," Will lies.

"Well, I can't accept that," Jack says. "Freddie Lounds is calling this a wild goose chase, and now you're telling me the same thing. I need a real lead here. You're saying the Ripper's sending me astray; I wanna know what's so important to him that he'd orchestrate a *murder spree* to try to hide it."

"I don't know."

"*Then figure it out*!"

Usually when Jack gets this strident, Will loses his temper too, a fight or flight response in the face of a powerful aggressor. But this time, he remains unmoved by Jack's belligerence. He takes it in with implacable cool, to the point where he seems almost robotic, disengaged from the conversation. The pendulum is swinging again, the pendulum has never stopped.

"There's only so much I can do for you, Jack. All I have to work with is secondhand information, rushed lab results, and whatever photos your techs decide I need to see. I can't catch a scent, not from in here. You have to accept that on this case I'm not your magic bullet. I have my limits: the walls of this hospital, the bars of my cell, these handcuffs."

Will puts on this performance and Hannibal watches him with ever mounting appreciation.

Jack is less appreciative. “Handcuffs and bars never stopped you before, Will. Why should this case be any different?”

Will just glides over this. His eyes meet Hannibal’s as he says: “If you find my opinion so inadequate, maybe you should talk to someone else instead. Someone who can actually offer you on-the-ground observation of the Ripper. Tell you what: why don’t you take Dr. Lecter with you? He can drive out to Gwynn Falls now, lend you another set of eyes. How about that?”

Slow animation in Hannibal’s face, something swimming in the deep. The cloak slips, revealing his smile.

A moment of silence on the phone line. “Will,” says Beverly, “*is that really a good idea*?”

Even Jack is dubious. “I thought you needed Hannibal to stay with you. You were pretty insistent about that.”

“Well, he has outworn his usefulness to me,” Will says, almost cheerfully, “so now you can have him. I bet you’re fine with that, Dr. Lecter.”

It isn’t actually a question, but Hannibal answers anyway. “Whatever you think is best.” The smile pulses in his voice.

“I don’t know about this, Jack.” Beverly sounds panicked.

“I’m not gonna say no to a volunteer,” Jack says. “I’ve already racked up an overtime bill tonight as big as my quarterly budget and I need as many people out here as I can get. But you better realize that Hannibal isn’t gonna do your work for you, Will. You stay in contact, understood? In a few minutes I’ll send you pictures from the crime scene and I expect you to tell me everything you can.”

“I’m not going anywhere,” says Will, in an absent voice.

“Good.” Jack terminates the phone call.

Will stops the pendulum, but it continues twisting lazily inside him, ready at any moment to resume its swing. He finds Hannibal’s eyes again.

Hannibal tilts his head: the good doctor, careful and concerned. “Are you certain you wouldn’t rather I stayed here?”

Will just nods.

Hannibal’s eyes reveal nothing. “Very well,” he says.

“Not to worry, Doctor,” says Chilton. “I’ll stay with him.”

“How reassuring.” Hannibal leans back in his chair and sighs, softly. “Then this is goodbye for now, Will.”

“Goodbye, Dr. Lecter.”

“Good luck out there,” says Chilton.

“Thank you.” Hannibal straightens his pullover, picks up his empty thermos, and sweeps out of the room.

The instant he is gone, Will screws his eyes shut. Now that he is himself again, he feels a tremor working its way through his body, from his thundering heart to his shivering fingers. Doubt and certainty war within him, until he can’t tell the difference between them. But this is no time for second-guessing; Hannibal is already gone. Out in the world. Unleashed.

The pendulum demands to swing. The room dissolves around him into unblemished darkness, and in an instant he is someone else.

He is Hannibal Lecter, and he is weaving a web. His web is made of bodies, blood, hair and fingerprints, and now he has all of Baltimore law enforcement entrapped in its hematic tangles. Meanwhile he is the unsated spider, sloping into the night, with one goal in mind: murder. But a murder distinct and separate from the generic carnage of his so-called ‘killing spree’. This murder sits close to his heart. An undeniable compulsion. He has extended himself in an effort to secure his moment, and when that moment comes he will savor it, he will bask in it, he will devour it…

Time jolts forward, out of his counting. When Will comes to, he looks down and sees that he is holding Chilton’s tablet, photos from the sixth crime scene loaded on its screen. He doesn’t remember looking at them. The time display tells him that nearly half an hour has gone by.

“Any thoughts?” Chilton asks him.

The pendulum still sways. Will blinks at Chilton as if the psychiatrist isn’t speaking English.

The phone rings. Jack again.

“I’m still at Gwynn Falls,” he says, without preamble. “Zeller’s here and he’s found something.”

“Is Dr. Lecter with you?” Will asks, in a hollow, nowhere voice.

“Not yet,” says Jack, annoyed at Will’s apparent lack of interest. “Must still be driving over. You wanna hear what Z found or not? It backs up your theory about the spree.”

“Sure, I’m listening.”

Zeller comes on the line. “She’s been frozen. Victim number six. Decomposition pattern definitely points to her having been frozen for at least a month. The Ripper thawed her out, cut her up some more, and then dumped her in the water. Maybe he was hoping water damage would disguise the signs of freezing, but he can’t fool me.”

“So this one died long before tonight,” Jack says. “You were right, Will. This isn’t a spree.”

Will is silent and staring. His heart is pounding, sending salvos of horror through his veins. “He’s getting rid of evidence,” he whispers. “Could any of the other bodies have been previously frozen?”

“Nah,” says Zeller. “This is definitely the first popsicle we’ve found tonight.”

“There will be more. He’s cleaning out his storage unit.”

Will says this out loud without thinking, but luckily Jack assumes he’s speaking figuratively. “You think the Ripper is sitting on a lot of frozen corpses?”

“Yes, Jack, I do.”

Zeller whistles. “Jesus. How many people has this guy killed?”

Will doesn’t answer that. Will doesn’t answer any of the other questions Jack poses to him. Time slides by. Will is away. Will is elsewhere. The pendulum picks up its pace. He is Hannibal Lecter, and Will Graham has forced his hand. Beverly Katz tiptoed into his inner sanctum, exposed his vulnerabilities, and now he has no choice but to refortify, to close up the gaps in his impenetrable façade. By pointing them out, Will has performed him a service, and now Will has again provided assistance by putting Hannibal back on the streets, where he might continue unfettered with his spring cleaning. His liquidation. Everything must go. There will be nothing left for Beverly to find in that storage unit. Three hundred square feet of empty space.

Will has to catch him. Will has to stop him.

There is something more at work beneath this spree. It was never simply creative camouflage for the disposal of frozen bodies. He has another goal in mind; he always does. His every act is triple-sided. The opportunity to clean out the storage unit is merely a bonus, an amusing perk. Hannibal gets no pleasure in parting with these trophies. Quite the opposite. This bowing to necessity pains him. But he wouldn’t go to all this trouble unless he was assured that there would be pleasure, grand euphoric pleasure, waiting for him down the line. There is a murder yet to come. Will can feel its potentiality pounding within him, counterpointing his heartbeat, at one with the pendulum.

“I know you’re going to do it,” he whispers. “I know you’re going to try. I know it. I know it.”

Chilton throws him an uneasy look. “Are you talking to me?”

A sharp knock on the Coffee Room door. Will hears it like a distant echo underwater. The guards open the door and Beverly steps in, her hands buried nervously in the pockets of her bomber jacket.

“Oh,” she says, on seeing Chilton there.

“Can I help you?”

“I was hoping to talk to Will.”

“Of course,” says Chilton smarmily, patting Hannibal’s vacated chair.

Since ‘alone’ was the unspoken word in her request, Beverly does not look happy at this turn of events. She stays standing near the half-opened door with her brow furrowed.

“What is going on with you?” she asks Will, carefully. “What are you doing?”

“Trying to catch the Chesapeake Ripper,” he says. His voice still has that hollow ring of absence. A part of him left this room with Hannibal, and he cannot summon it back.

“Uh huh,” Beverly says, disbelievingly. “Have you heard from Dr. Lecter since you, uh, set him loose?”

“Not yet. But I will.”

“Why did you let him go? Will, what are you *thinking*?”

“Dr. Lecter will be fine,” Chilton says, reassuringly, to Bev.

Will is staring over her shoulder and out the door. The pendulum is still swinging, still swinging, in perpetual motion.

“I’d like you to do me a favor, Beverly.”

She raises her eyebrows. “It had better be to drive to Gwynn Falls. Because that’s where I’m going now. I’ll escort Dr. Lecter for the rest of the night. Make sure he has a ride.”

“You don’t have to do that,” Will says. “But Dr. Chilton would like a ride. Why don’t you take him home?”

Both Chilton and Beverly gape at him. “What?” says Chilton. “But I’m your FBI liaison!”

“You’re too distracting. And I need to think. I can get another liaison. Beverly, can you call Alana Bloom? I’m sure she’ll be ok with taking over for Dr. Chilton.”

“Uh,” says Beverly, thrown for a total loop. “Fine. Ok.”

Dr. Chilton isn’t having it. “Dr. Bloom is unaffiliated with this hospital. She doesn’t have the clearance to intermediate on its behalf. I must insist if anyone is to be present during this consultation, it should be the psychiatrist in charge of your treatment.”

“But this must be such an onerous posting for a man of your talents, Doctor,” Will says, in a voice as greasy as Chilton’s. “When all I really need is someone who can pick up a phone. A glorified secretary. I think Alana Bloom can handle it, don’t you?”

“Hmmm,” says Chilton, buckling under the ventriloquized flattery.

“Let Agent Katz take you home,” Will says. “Beverly, do you mind?”

She is staring at Will, her eyes needle-sharp. “Um,” she says. “I guess I don’t mind.”

“Well,” says Chilton, “I really shouldn’t exhaust myself on your account, not when there are other patients in this hospital who need me. I’d better get some rest, if only for their sakes.” He stands up, takes the tablet out of Will’s limp hands, and replaces it in his briefcase. “But if the Chesapeake Ripper kills again while you are without any means of communication, it will be you who answers to Agent Crawford, not I.”

Will just blinks at him. “Good night, Doctor.”

Chilton pulls one of the guards aside to have a word, and while he’s occupied, Will motions for Beverly to come closer.

“What is this?” she hisses. “You’re acting *bizarre*.”

“Stay with him,” he says. “Once he’s home, stake out his house. Don’t let him know you’re there. Don’t let anyone know you’re there, especially not Jack.”

Her mouth falls open. “Does Chilton have something to do with the spree?”

“Just stay with him. Even if Jack orders you to go.” Will strains, trying to appear like himself again. He must perform the role of the person Beverly knows and trusts. “I need you there, Beverly. Please. Just do this one thing for me, ok?”

“Ok,” she says, but there is hesitation in her voice. “I’ve got it covered.”

“Thank you.”

She nods listlessly and escorts Chilton out.

Will is left alone, save for the guards. But he doesn’t experience any anxiety in being cut off from the investigation. Because he isn’t cut off, not really. Though he may be handcuffed to a table inside the Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane, his enflamed imagination tethers him to the world at large. The proceedings unfold before him with all the verisimilitude of a waking dream.

There sit Beverly and Chilton, side-by-side, pale faces thrown into sharp relief by the passing headlights as they drive in sleepless silence through the darkened streets of Baltimore.

There is Hannibal, sliding past the chaos of the sixth crime scene like a vulture flying through a smoking wildfire. He announces his appearance at Jack’s side with a friendly pat on his tensed shoulder, and, like magic, Jack relaxes. Finally, someone who understands the terrible pressure he is under.

Will plots these paths, their swerves and branches, all with an eye towards their fast-approaching intersection. He can control so little, he can control so much. The pendulum still

swings…

Alana enters the room. Under the fluorescent overheads her skin seems to glow. She appears fresher and more clear-eyed than anyone has a right to be at five in the morning, but as her evaluating gaze sweeps over Will, her eyebrows draw together, seeking reassurance from each other.

“Hi,” she says.

“Hi.” His voice is rusty, ancient. He feels he is looking at her from the far-off shore of some other continent, with a vast ocean rioting between them.

“How long have you been here?” she asks.

“I don’t know,” he says vaguely. “Nine months?”

Which makes her frown in earnest. “Have you slept at all tonight, Will? Have they given you anything to drink? What happened to your hands?”

He doesn’t answer her questions; she doesn’t seem to expect him to.

“You’ve got him handcuffed too tightly,” she says to the guards. “Look at him, he can’t even lean back.”

She touches his hand as if trying to wake him up, and then she bears down on the guards with elemental force. “What is going on here? Will Graham is assisting with a murder investigation; he isn’t in solitary confinement. He is cooperating, he has done nothing but cooperate: both with you and with the FBI. You have no reason to keep him so uncomfortable. Please loosen these handcuffs immediately.”

“We have to wait for an orderly,” one of the guards says, but at the expression on Alana’s face he rushes to comply. Will is barely aware as they relax his chains and bring him water. Alana stays standing; as long as he is uncomfortable, so is she.

With the sudden change in his physical circumstances, Will returns to himself a little. He leans back with a sigh, rolling his neck. He only now notices how his back muscles have hardened with pain.

“Better?” Alana asks, sitting down next to him.

“Yeah,” he breathes.

“You should have called me sooner.”

“If they let me handle a phone, I would have.”

She pushes her own cell phone across the table to him. He smiles a little. “Thanks.”

“Are you ok?” she asks him. “You seem somewhere else.”

“I am,” he agrees. “But it’s nice knowing you’ll be there when I get back.”

She stares at him, more confused than touched. The moment is interrupted by the ringing phone. Will answers it himself, a nice change. “Jack?”

“Will, what’s going on? I’ve been trying to reach you.”

“Sorry,” he says, unapologetically. “Switched psychiatrists on you. I’m with Alana Bloom now; guess you must already know that if you called her.”

“Why did you send Dr. Chilton away, Will?” Hannibal asks. So he finally made it to the crime scene. His tone is cold, incurious, and when Will answers him he matches it exactly.

“He needed some rest, so I let him go. Is that a problem, Dr. Lecter?”

“Not in the least,” says Hannibal. “Hello Alana. I’m sorry you didn’t get the rest you wanted.”

“That’s ok,” she says, lips quirking. “How does it look out there?”

Jack is losing patience. “How does it look? It looks like a horror show! And letting Dr. Chilton go *is* a problem, Will. It is very much a problem. I told you to stay connected, and what do you do? You send your liaison away. You cut yourself off. I need your head in the game on this. You’ve been way too wrapped up in your *psychiatrists* tonight.”

“His psychiatrists are the only people looking out for him,” says Alana. “Jack, you left him chained up in here for six hours without any water. He’s a human being, not a Magic Eight ball. You can’t carry him around in your pocket so you can shake him any time you need answers.”

Jack swears under his breath. “Look, Will, I’m sorry, I didn’t know. I didn’t ask for him to be chained up without any water, Alana. All I asked was that he be made available to me. It’s that deathtrap of a hospital that can’t take good care of him.”

“I’m fine,” says Will. “Not that anyone’s asking me.”

“I can’t be everywhere at once,” says Jack. “I wish I could. Local PD is in the middle of a mutiny here. I’ve got search teams going off in the opposite direction to where I send them, I’ve got people shipping forensic samples to the wrong lab, I’ve got unlicensed rubbernecks on my crime scenes. Someone’s been leaking key details of the investigation to Freddie Lounds. She made it to crime scene seven *before* we did. This train is jumping the rails, Will. I can’t stand by and watch you jump too.”

“I’m with you, Jack,” says Will. “I’m not jumping. You have another body?”

“Stuffed in a dumpster in Morrell Park. No idea how long he’s been here, but Sanitation found him twenty minutes ago.”

“Has this one been frozen?”

“Not according to Z.” Jack sighs. “They just keep coming, Will. They keep on coming. When’s it gonna stop?”

“I don’t know.”

“You don’t know. You don’t know. Christ.”

“Jack,” says Hannibal, pacifying.

“Sorry,” grunts Jack. “Can you at least give me an opinion on whether the sunrise will stop him? We’re a little over an hour away.”

“The Ripper has never been one for operating by daylight,” says Hannibal.

“Sunrise might slow him down, but I don’t think anything can stop him,” Will says. “He stops this when he has achieved everything he was hoping to achieve, and not a second before.”

“But what’s he hoping to achieve?” Jack demands. “Come on, Will, you can’t say stuff like that if you don’t have some idea of what he wants.”

“I’m betting Dr. Lecter has a theory,” says Will.

“I do indeed,” says Hannibal, “and I expect it is the same as yours.”

“Yours first.”

And Hannibal lays it out, with placid eloquence. “My theory is that the Chesapeake Ripper started this spree because he wanted to kill one particular person. This victim, his true intended victim, is personally connected to the Ripper. He or she is someone who knows him, who is perhaps very close to him. So in order to disguise this connection, he has concocted this idea of a spree. If his intended is simply one of many victims, the FBI will never think to link this person back to the Ripper. He can preserve his identity under the cover of an arbitrary rampage that is in actuality not so arbitrary after all.” He clears his throat. “I know this sounds outlandish. Hard to swallow. But it is only a theory, after all. How close is it to yours, Will?”

“Word for word,” says Will.

“So one of these victims is connected to the Ripper?” Jack breathes. “Directly connected?” He sounds like he has just been told the location of Eldorado. “So that’s why he’s taking their wallets, mutilating their faces! He doesn’t want us to identify these people. But how are we gonna know which one of them is the true victim?”

“We won’t know,” says Will. “It’s possible he hasn’t even killed this person yet. He’s looking for his moment.”

“We better hope he finds it.” Jack’s voice ripples with excitement. “If we get a body we can link back to him, then it’s curtains for the Chesapeake Ripper. In the meantime I better get the boys at Violent Crime to run prints and dental records at triple speed. We need IDs and we need them fast.”

He hangs up.

Alana looks at Will. “The Chesapeake Ripper has killed seven people tonight. He is risking exposure. This person he wants to kill—it must be someone very important to him.”

“Someone whose *death* is very important to him.” Will corrects her. He rubs his face, hides his eyes. “The Ripper is a sadist. Every bone in his body is vindictive. No one is important to him, Alana. No one.”

He sees Hannibal take his leave from Jack in a myriad of different ways. Maybe he pleads exhaustion. Maybe he asks to go to Quantico, or to inspect one of the other crime scenes. Maybe he simply slips away while Jack is busy trying in vain to fit a muzzle on Freddie Lounds.

He sees Beverly waiting in her car, fifty yards from Dr. Chilton’s front door. Beverly throws leery looks at the red BMW parked in Chilton’s driveway and the screaming opulence of the velvet curtains in his living room window, which she can just see from where she’s sitting. Chilton still has his lights on. He must be awake. A high-pitched cry pierces the night and Beverly is out of her car, running, running, calling it in, gun already drawn…

Hard to swallow.

This phrase breaks into Will’s mind, an apparent non sequitur, origin unknown, so separate from his current train of thought it is as if another person has suggested it.

Hard to swallow. That was what Hannibal had said. An outlandish theory. *Hard to swallow.*

Will sits up, eyes so wide they are beginning to bulge. He presses his palms flat into the cold surface of the table. He can feel the hair on his arms standing straight up, electrically excited. He only now becomes aware of the pendulum, swinging at full speed.

“You could call me his witness…” he says.

Alana watches him, her lips pressed together. But she doesn’t interrupt.

“Is it a trick?” Will asks himself (but he is not asking *himself*, not really). “Or was it a trick before? Did I get it wrong?”

His hands tighten around the phone, and before he is fully aware of what he’s doing, he begins scrolling through the contacts.

“Who are you calling?” Alana asks.

“Beverly,” he says, both to her and to Beverly, who has just picked up.

“Hey,” she says. “I’m glad you called. Look, as much as I enjoy spying on Dr. Chilton as he marathons *Real Housewives*, I’m getting antsy here. Jack’s called me four times already trying to get me to come out to Morrell Park. I can’t keep blowing him off.”

“Ok,” says Will.

“Ok, what?”

“Ok, you can leave.”

“But what about Chilton?”

Will ignores her question. “I need you to go to the house of the person who told me about Verger. Do you understand what I’m telling you, Beverly? The person who told me about Verger.”

“I got it,” says Beverly. “Will, what’s going on? You have to tell me.”

“I guessed wrong, Bev. I need you there *right now*.”

“What did you get wrong? Will?”

“Just get over there.”

He hangs up. Alana is staring at him.

“Was that related to the investigation?” she asks him.

“Yeah,” he says. “No. Not really.”

Will is there already. Projected through matter, air, space and time. He watches as that pale specter of a woman glides through the dark spaces of her home. Bedelia du Maurier helped Will, she passed him information, and now Hannibal has found her out. Betrayal by someone so close, someone so trusted, cannot be countenanced.

Hard to swallow, that’s what Hannibal had said. Rimes swallowed his tongue. Hannibal knows Bedelia told Will about Rimes; he knows Will knows. All this time, Will has believed Hannibal set this spree up to give himself the opportunity to attack Dr. Chilton. But now he realizes that Hannibal only wanted Will to believe that; Hannibal insinuated to Will he wanted to kill Chilton, and Will swallowed the bait. Stupid. It’s so obvious now. Of course Chilton isn’t the target. Chilton isn’t worthy enough to sit at the center of Hannibal’s gleaming web. That distinction must be earned. Du Maurier—du Maurier has earned it. She is a finer creature, capable of comprehension, appreciation, higher thought. She deserves a death of consequence. It has been du Maurier all along.

Will is there as Beverly pulls up in the drive. He sees her slowly approaching the front door. The house is dark, its occupant asleep—or more than asleep. Beverly's shadow warps monstrously as it falls over the front steps. She knocks on the door. No answer. She tries the handle and the door swings open, beckoning.

She edges inside, ears primed for any sound, the crunch of fabric, the squeak of stockinged feet on the floorboards. She doesn't call for backup, not yet. She has just arrived at the scene, can't be sure anything's wrong, and this is too sensitive a situation for her to risk crying wolf. She might be intruding on a crime scene, sure, but then again, she might be intruding on an innocent woman's slumber.

The front hallway is pristine, untouched. No signs of struggle. Beverly slips from room to room, her feet sliding over the carpet as she makes her way up the stairs. There's no one; nothing. The low *shukshuk* of the ceiling fan, a breathing beast above her head. Beverly's watchful eyes alight in the dark, her heartbeat as loud in her ears as a beaten gong. Du Maurier's house is as slick and empty and unforgiving as Dr. Lecter's. Beverly makes this association between the two psychiatrists and can't shake it. Someone is watching her, someone is stalking her. Du Maurier or Lecter, it doesn't matter, it's the same damn thing isn't it. A cold intelligence, ruthless, removed from the world Beverly hails from, observing her, charting her weaknesses, lapping up her fear. *Shukshuk, shukshuk*. She spins on the spot, points the gun, spins again. Nothing but shadows in the darkness. She tries to get control of herself. Her mind is getting away from her. The strangeness of the situation has infected her, just as it long ago infected Will. She unlocks her elbows, relaxes a shade, chooses reason over fear, and that is when he jumps her. The gun fires at the wall, a lamp crashes to the floor, the silver streak of a knife flashing overhead. *Shukshuk, shukshuk*.

Beverly is too late. Beverly is too early. Either way… either way…

Hannibal's cold fingers touch his neck. "Will," he says. "You have to breathe."

Will rears away, gasping. But it's only his imagination going haywire. Hannibal isn't here. Hannibal isn't touching him. It's Alana.

"Are you ok?" she asks, looking truly alarmed.

He recovers himself, as much of himself as can be recovered. "Yeah," he says. "Sorry. Miles away…"

Alana settles back into her seat. "Will…whatever you're going through right now, it will help if you talk to someone about it. You're tormenting yourself with impossible things—but if you talk about them, if you learn to put them into words, you not only make them possible, you make them real. And if you make them real, you strip them of the power they have over you."

"Sorry," he says again, on autopilot.

Inside his head, death layered over death, every possible variation, scenario after scenario of butchery. He sees Bedelia du Maurier alive. He sees her dead. He sees Hannibal standing

over her. He sees Beverly slipping into the room, gun aimed. So many permutations, so many outcomes. How does Hannibal stand it?

Time passes as swift as murder…

A knock on the Coffee Room door. Beverly plows into the room, looking exhausted but determined.

“Hey,” Will breathes, relieved to see her.

“Hey,” she says.

Dr. Chilton walks in after her. “Well?” he asks Will. “What do you need now?”

Will frowns. “What’s he doing here?”

“Is that all you have to say for yourself?” Chilton looks scandalized. “I thought you needed me here! Miss Katz dragged me out of bed, wasted time by driving me halfway across Baltimore on what she claimed was an urgent call but was really just a false alarm, and then when we finally get here, it turns out—what? That you’ve changed your mind?”

Alana raises her eyebrows.

“Sorry, Doctor,” says Beverly, who doesn’t sound sorry at all. “I guess Will didn’t need you here after all. Maybe you can just go to your office or something? Get some breakfast from the kitchens?”

“Now I don’t need you to tell me what to do,” sniffs Chilton. “As you’re clearly not very good at your job. As far as I can tell, you’ve just been running around Baltimore like a chicken with its head cut off, barging into people’s homes for no apparent reason! I’m going now—and I don’t need an escort!”

Alana gets to her feet. “Doctor, I for one am glad you came back. We need to have a serious discussion regarding Will’s treatment…” And she all but frogmarches Dr. Chilton out of the room.

Beverly and Will look at each other. Alone at last. Except for the guards, of course. Beverly gives them an uneasy look but decides her words are too important to censor. She takes off her coat and throws it over Alana’s chair.

“That man,” she declares, pointing after Chilton, “is the *worst*. But I couldn’t just leave him. He’d be a sitting duck.”

Will isn’t interested in discussing the awfulness of Chilton. “What happened at du Maurier’s?”

“The house was empty. No one home.”

He takes this in. “She’s agoraphobic. She wouldn’t just leave.”

“You know she left at least once before, to come see you. Look, Will, everything was in order at du Maurier’s. The door was locked. There were no signs of a struggle. A lot of empty hangers in her closet. She might have gone on vacation or something. I don’t blame her; I’d hightail it too if I thought a serial killer was after me.”

“Noooo.” Will hides his face behind his hands. “He got her, Bev. You’re gonna find du Maurier in a field somewhere with half her insides missing. He tricked me. I tried to get ahead of him, but I got it wrong. I just got it wrong.”

Beverly does not attempt to comfort him. “He definitely hasn’t finished dropping bodies. I just got a call from Jack. State police found a woman out near Eldersburg. I’m gonna head out there now.”

“Could be du Maurier,” says Will, into his hands. “Fuck.”

Beverly crosses the room and removes Will’s hands from his face. “Listen to me,” she says, voice low so the guards won’t hear, “and listen good. You have to shut this down.”

“What do you think I’m trying to do?” he whispers.

“What do I think you’re trying to do?” she repeats faintly, with morbid faux-amusement. “Hell if I know. I thought we were going after the hard evidence. Remember that plan? Get his key and raid his storage unit? That’s what we agreed. But this spree—this sham of an investigation—this isn’t what we talked about. This isn’t our game, Will—it’s Lecter’s. And yet here you are, still playing it.”

“I know it’s Lecter’s game,” Will says, “but we can catch him tonight if we play it right. Look, even Dr. Lecter can’t be in two places at once. He can’t go on a murder spree and investigate that murder spree all at the same time. If he keeps going at this pace, he’ll slip up. And we just have to be there when it happens.”

Her grip tightens around his wrists. “And what about all the people who die in the meantime? These are innocent people, Will, and they are dying *brutal, horrific deaths.* You’re not out there. You haven’t seen those crime scenes. You haven’t seen Jack, busting his ass, pushing himself to the limit, all in the hopes of catching a guy who just so happens to be riding shotgun in the squad car with him!”

“I’m sorry, Beverly,” whispers Will, in his calm detached voice. “I know how frustrating this must be for you.”

Her jaw drops. “What is *wrong* with you? Are you even listening to yourself? I know you’re kind of out of the loop here. You have nothing but your photos and your chats with Lecter and your old files. Maybe all of this violence, this madness, these terrible things—the things that used to bother you so much when you were out in the field—maybe they’re not as real to you any more, now that you can’t actually be out there to witness their effects firsthand. I get that, Will. Really I do.”

Will is so offended that some of the feeling seeps back into his voice. He twists his hands away from her, as much as the handcuffs will allow. “I haven’t forgotten what it’s like to be out there. I see as much as you do. I see it vividly. I’m not about to forget it.”

“If that’s true,” says Beverly, and she drops her voice again, so that he can barely hear her, “if that’s really true, then why did you dangle Dr. Chilton in front of Hannibal Lecter like he was a tasty piece of meat?”

He stares at her. “That’s not what I—”

“I was *there*. I’m not an idiot; I saw what you were doing. And I’m not ok with it, Will. I’m not ok with you playing games with people’s lives. Just because Lecter does it, doesn’t mean you have to do it, too.”

Will growls in frustration. “I’ve already explained to you: we can’t catch Dr. Lecter if we play by the book. I have to do things his way, Beverly. I have to.”

She puts both hands down on the table and leans into his face. “Shut it down. I’m asking you nicely. Just shut this whole thing down. Now.”

Her voice roils with anger. He can feel it bubbling in his pores. He leans away from her, as much as he is able. “I *can’t*.”

“Yes,” she says, “you can.”

“What am I going to do—ask him to stop? I don’t hold his leash, Bev. I don’t have that kind of control over him.”

And now her voice takes on a quality he has never heard in it before: something raw and wrathful. This is Beverly at her limit.

She says: “Seems to me you have a hell of a lot more control over him than you think you do. He asked you, Will. When Jack wanted to know whether the Chesapeake Ripper had closed the window, finished his cycle, Lecter didn’t answer that question. Instead he asked you—he asked you, and *you told him to keep the window open*. And he did exactly like you told him. He kept it open. He kept killing.”

Will’s jaw has dropped. “That’s not what happened,” he whispers.

Bev won’t hear it. “You keep telling me I don’t understand what’s going on. That I can’t understand what’s going on between you and Lecter. But I see this much. He is taking all his cues *from you*! This whole show—he’s putting it on for you. Only for you. And, yeah, I get why you’d be in denial about that. I’d be in denial too if I had a serial killer murdering people just to make my prison sentence a little less boring. But this has got to stop, Will. No more playing along, ok? Show’s over.”

“Beverly,” Will says, voice shaking, “there is nothing I can do to stop him. Believe me. There is nothing I can do.”

The sound of a voice clearing. They both turn and see Alana in the threshold, watching them.

“What’s going on?” she asks.

Will becomes aware of just how close Beverly is to him, how upset they both look. Beverly straightens up, looking more angry than embarrassed. “Nothing,” she says, wiping her face. “Just getting something off my chest.”

Alana says nothing. She is watching Beverly closely.

Beverly grabs her coat from where she threw it. “If you won’t stop it,” she says to Will, “then I will.”

“Beverly,” says Will, “*No*—”

But she is already walking away.

“Beverly, what are you going to do? Bev!”

She ignores him. She stalks past Alana and the guards, out the door. Alana watches her go, her eyebrows raised.

“Will, what was that?” she asks.

“It’s—uh—personal,” says Will, still reeling.

Alana looks incredulous. “Personal? It didn’t have anything to do with the Chesapeake Ripper?”

“No,” he says. “It’s between me and Bev, Alana. Ok?”

“Ok,” she says, but she’s unsatisfied. “Just tell me, is Beverly all right?”

“Yeah,” he says. “Sure. She’ll be fine.”

“And what about you? Are you all right?”

“Nope.” He smiles ruefully. “Big surprise.”

His heart is fluttering in his chest, actively trying to escape his body. How can Beverly stop Hannibal? What is she going to do?

He goes a half hour without hearing anything. He tries calling Beverly’s phone, but she doesn’t pick up. A little after six-thirty, Jack, Jimmy, and Zeller walk into the Coffee Room, all of them resembling the walking dead.

“Where is Dr. Lecter?” Will asks immediately.

“Where is Beverly?” is Jack’s angry response. He peers around the bare room as if expecting her to materialize in one of the corners.

Will’s head is swimming. “When did you last hear from her?”

“More than an hour ago,” says Jimmy, nervously.

“She was here,” Alana says. “But she left in,”—Will looks at her warningly—“a hurry.”

“You don’t know where she was going?”

“Um,” says Will. And for the first time that night, he hates having to lie. “She—she mentioned driving out to Morrell Park to find you.”

“Well, she didn’t,” says Jack. “And now she isn’t answering her phone.” He heaves a sigh so loud the walls shake with it. “Beverly’s gone AWOL. Freddie Lounds is on the warpath. And someone on my team has been stabbing me in the back very, very publicly.”

“Stabbing you in the back?” Alana asks.

“Miss Lounds ran an article,” Hannibal says, walking in with a tray of coffees balanced in one hand. Will isn't sure whether to feel overjoyed or horrified at seeing him there.

“More like an evisceration,” Jack grumbles. “It’s full of detail: graphic descriptions of all the victims’ injuries, the names of the key people involved with the investigation, an enumeration of every mishap we’ve experienced during the last seven hours.”

“She printed some very unflattering things about Jack,” Hannibal says, as he circles the room, putting a coffee on the table in front of each of them like a very sinister butler.

Jack nods, looking reluctant to divulge the full details, but knowing he must. “She quoted me, *out of context,* saying I hoped the Ripper keeps killing, as it’s the only way we’re gonna be able to catch him. Completely out of context, that’s not how I meant it, you all know that. The story has been up for only twenty minutes and it’s already a firestorm. The morning shows are picking it up; everyone’s accusing me of endangering people’s lives when I am out there, putting my neck on the line, trying to catch the Ripper. But nothing goes my way tonight. I have eight people dead, I’m completely out of resources, I have members of my team wandering off the reservation, and I have you,”—he points at Will—“going rogue!”

“I’m with you, Jack,” says Will. “I haven’t abandoned you.”

“Yeah?” Jack’s eyes narrow. “Then are you ready to tell me what the deal is with the mirrors?”

Will hesitates for a second too long before saying, “There’s nothing to tell.”

Jack shakes his head, so laden with disappointments he can’t even find the energy for true anger. “You’re holding out on me. You never used to do that, Will. You never used to lie.”

Will is getting annoyed. He's in no mood for squabbling with Jack. "Except for the time I murdered five people and failed to tell you about it?"

Everyone stares at him, shocked at the baldness of this statement. Even Hannibal raises his eyebrows.

"Ok," says Jack, "except for that. But you were sick back then. You're not sick now. So tell me…about…the mirrors." As he says this, he leans in across the table, encroaching on Will's space.

Will feels like he's being interrogated; he is cuffed and confined, stared at and prodded. His patience is at its lowest ebb. "I've given you what I can. Always have. I've given you the answers you want to hear. I can't give you any more!"

"I'm not looking for the answers I want to hear!" Jack shouts. "I'm looking for the truth!"

"No you're not," Will shouts back. "Not from me!"

"And what is that supposed to mean? *What is that supposed to mean*?"

Alana stands up. "Jack," she intones, "*back off*. Neither of you is fit right now to be having this discussion. Will is here for you. But you have to be here for him in return."

Jack sighs again, even louder than before.

Into the tense silence, Hannibal says: "We must remember, we are all in this together. There is no villain here."

"Oh for fuck's sake," says Will. "NOBODY ASKED YOU."

Hannibal's mouth drops open. Alana pales. Jack looks like he has just been struck by lightning.

"Will," says Alana, quietly. "He's just trying to help."

The compulsion to scream is so present, so irresistible, that Will almost gives in. But at the last instant he swallows it and instead chokes out: "Sorry." The word is torture to him, but he has no choice but to keep saying it. "Sorry, Dr. Lecter."

Hannibal gives him a dignified nod in response. Will wants to die.

Jack's phone rings. He picks up. "Yeah?"

Will can immediately tell that news is breaking in Jack's ear.

"Where?" he thunders. "And where is she now? Ok. I'll be there."

He hangs up. "We have a problem."

"Just the one?" Zeller mutters.

Jack throws him such a look of fury that Zeller actually cowers.

“Beverly has been attacked,” Jack says.

A whine in Will’s ears, keening on and on, the death throes of an innocent creature. Jack keeps talking; meaningless noise. There is no one in this room except Will and Hannibal.

Hannibal’s eyes are two black holes, pulling him in, crushing him, gorging, gorging.

“What did you do?” Will breathes. “Just tell me. *What did you do to her*?”

Chapter End Notes

Happy New Year! *walks away whistling*

Chapter 21

Chapter Summary

Will takes a bite out of crime.

Chapter Notes

Picking up from right where we left off...

"Just tell me. *What did you do to her*?"

A delicate cant of Hannibal's head. He doesn't answer.

Will snorts a breath. "You've made a mistake. There's no one else to pin it on, no one left to blame—no one except you. You won't get away with this. You won't."

They are all looking at him: Alana, Jack, Price, and Zeller.

Alana reaches out, lays a hand on his arm, squeezes.

"Snap out of it, Will..." And Jack actually snaps his fingers near Will's eyes, with no effect. It is as if a fine sheet of impenetrable glass separates Will and Hannibal from the rest of world.

"Will," Hannibal says, quietly. "I am not responsible for what happened to Agent Katz."

Will emits an animal snarl. Alana's grip on his arm tightens.

"Look at me," Hannibal continues. "Look at me with clear eyes. Allow yourself to relax and you will see. I am not to blame."

Pressure burning in Will's chest. It becomes so tangible it begins to smother him. "I am looking at you," he gasps. "And I know exactly what I see."

Hannibal's eyes like two dark embers, a slow burn. "What do you see?"

Jack doesn't let Will answer this. "Come on, Will. He was with me the whole time. He was not out attacking anyone."

Will ignores Jack. He leans toward Hannibal, as much as he can.

“If you hurt her… if you did anything to her… There is no cell on earth strong enough to stop me coming after you. I will make you pay for what you did—I will make you pay in blood.”

Hannibal’s eyes ignite.

“I think he better go back to his cell,” says Jack. “Guards, can we get an orderly in here? *Now*?”

Will’s lungs are burning, and the room seems to burn with them. A smoking haze through which Jack is talking, waving his arms, sending a guard away. Hannibal’s eyes like lighthouse beams in the murk.

Alana remains by Will’s side. Her grip on his arm has reached the point of pain.

“Will, look at me.”

Her voice reaches him. The pressurized rage leaves him so abruptly he sways, off-balance. With her other hand Alana tilts Will’s cheek, redirecting his gaze away from Hannibal, towards her. Will lets himself be led.

“Beverly is safe,” she says. “Jack is going to the hospital now. What happened to Beverly wasn’t Hannibal’s fault, and it wasn’t yours. Accusations won’t help her any more than they’re helping you. Please, Will. Come back to me.”

“Alana…” He can hardly speak. His throat has closed up.

Jack backs away. He throws on his coat and motions for Price and Zeller, who both look stunned, to follow him out the door. He beckons Hannibal too, but Hannibal shakes his head. He stays seated, long fingers wrapped around his coffee cup, eyes intent on Alana and Will.

Jack looks doubtful, but he doesn’t push further. “You got him?” he asks Alana.

She removes her hand from Will’s face, slowly, tentatively, as if she has left something in precarious balance.

“I’ve got him,” she says.

When Barney appears, he quickly discerns that imperturbable silence is what’s needed from him. He unchains Will, nudging him along when he proves unresponsive. Alana and Hannibal remain with Will as Barney and a phalanx of guards accompany him back to his cell. Will isn’t aware of any of it. All of his cognitive powers are engaged in the ruthless neutralization of his own imagination, a beast that batters against its restraints with no regard for its own wellbeing. It hungers to bombard him with images of Beverly near death, the slide of a knife, Hannibal’s fingers winching tighter and tighter around her throat. He can’t bear to

see these things, not even within the confines of his mind. So he shuts himself down, switches off. His eyes go glassy, his movements mechanical. Dead Will walking.

He surfaces from his stupor when he is back in his cell. As Barney removes the cuffs and shackles, Will becomes aware of Hannibal speaking in an undertone to Alana.

“I cannot abandon him now. If I do, he will extrapolate his current misapprehensions into a scenario with little to no bearing on his reality. Will can only find the truth if I remain by his side, if he is allowed to watch me, test me, and see me as I am.”

“You and I have never seen eye to eye on exposure therapy,” Alana whispers back. “But you’ve been trying to get through to him for months, and he has shown no improvement. Continued exposure to you has only made him worse as far as I can see.”

“But there is only so much you see,” Hannibal reminds her. “You are not present for our sessions. Will has made progress. You must remember, Alana, that you have an effect on Will’s mental state far more pronounced than any I might bring about. Has it occurred to you that his hostility might be precipitated not by my presence, but by yours?”

She stares at him, her eyes wide. “So you’re implying *I* should be the one who leaves him?”

“Not at all.”

A tremor in her voice. “I should. I know I should. I have turned this into such a mess.”

“You’ve had help. We don’t weave our webs alone.” Hannibal reaches out to touch her, but then, with the merest flick of his eyes, he sees Will watching him and checks the movement. “He needs you, Alana,” he continues. “Please stay.”

Barney and the guards finish freeing Will and file out of his cell. Will stays how they left him, with his hands against the brick wall and his head dipped.

“You’re both staying here,” he says.

He can feel Hannibal and Alana staring at his back—Hannibal with curiosity, Alana with shock, as she didn’t realize Will was present enough to hear their conversation.

“Are you sure?” she asks him.

Will moves away from the wall, still not looking at them, and drops bonelessly into a seated position on his cot. He rubs at his face as if trying to scrub it off.

“It isn’t up for debate,” he says.

They wait, a triptych of tension. Alana makes a few attempts at conversation, but Will’s answers are so monosyllabic and disconnected that she soon relents. Instead they sit in the

turgid silence of a sickbed vigil, although the person for whose health Will fears is miles away.

A phone rings. Hannibal reaches into his coat pocket—the right coat pocket, the pocket from which Bev was planning to extract his key, a passing association that makes Will ache—and pulls out his phone. He looks at the number and stands up. “Excuse me.”

He takes the call and begins pacing in tight strides by the far wall. Will and Alana watch him, but they may was well be watching the wall: Hannibal does more listening than speaking, and displays zero reaction to whatever he’s hearing. When he hangs up he simply stands there, his shoulders raised, staring hard into the bricks. Will feels a tide of hatred rising; he needs Hannibal to speak.

Alana prompts him. “Is there news?”

“Not concerning Miss Katz.” Hannibal voice is strange, shivery. He turns, revealing to them his rigid profile. He brings a hand up to rub, apparently unconsciously, at his bottom lip.

Will’s eyes widen. Alana stands.

“My colleague, ah…” Hannibal collects himself and tries again. “Bedelia du Maurier has disappeared.”

Alana, stricken, takes a step towards him. “What happened?”

Hannibal gives a helpless shrug. “They don’t know. One of her neighbors reported a break-in, but when the police arrived at her home, no one was present. Some of her clothing and jewelry are missing, but apparently nothing else was taken. She has simply… vanished.”

A tide of rage rising inside Will. He hasn’t seen Hannibal this vividly emotional since that terrible morning of the ear, when Hannibal knelt in despair and pleaded with Will to turn himself in. Will has forgotten Hannibal is capable of this, that Hannibal can mold his emotions into a distress not only believable, but compelling.

He compels Alana now. The intensity of his feeling draws her forward, for she is forever magnetized by other people’s pain. She stands beside Hannibal, not touching him, but watching him very closely.

“I’m sorry,” she says.

“She has not left her home in years.” Hannibal wipes the side of his face. “I can’t help but worry this might—this might be related to the Ches…” And he chokes, the words so monstrous he can’t bring himself to speak them.

The tide of rage has reached its height. Will is shaking, his fists white-knuckled at the cot’s edge.

Alana throws her arms around Hannibal. “You can’t be sure of that. I know your first instinct is to think ahead, to consider the likelihood of every possibility, but right now it’s pointless. You’ll only torture yourself. Just wait and see. Wait and see.”

As Alana draws him against her shoulder, Hannibal glances up and sees Will staring at him from out of the tops of his eyes, a flat blank stare that nevertheless communicates his unholy fury. Hannibal's grief-stricken expression does not alter, but he returns Will's stare unblinkingly, sopping up his anger.

After Hannibal has had his fill of consolation, they return to a silence even heavier than before, laden as it is with hidden resentments, private hopes, the unbearable unsaid.

Twenty minutes later, the gate rolls back and a host of dark-suited people march down the corridor like an oncoming funeral procession. Jack is at its head. His eyes jump from Will sitting on the cot with his head bowed, to Hannibal and Alana, who both stand up when they see him.

"How are we doing over here?" Jack asks, a little threateningly. "We doing better?"

"We're ok," says Alana. "Jack, what's going on?" She gapes at the black mass of agents congregating behind him.

By way of explanation, Jack says: "We have a big problem."

Will whitens. "*Where is Beverly*?"

"Right here."

And from behind the mass of dark suits, out steps Beverly. Alive. Smiling.

For a moment Will can't speak, can't move, can't feel.

"Hey," says Bev. There is a curving cut across her left temple and her right arm is in a sling. Even though her smile is very tired, there is still a trace of slyness at its corner.

Will stands up and staggers to the bars. "You're ok."

"Yeah," she says. "Relatively speaking."

Alana makes a noise of relief. Will looks to Hannibal in triumph—how could he have let Beverly escape?—but to his surprise, Hannibal does not look angry, or foiled, or especially affected by Beverly's reappearance. If anything, he looks confused.

"What happened to you?" he asks Beverly, nothing but polite curiosity in his voice.

Beverly meets his eyes steadily, but lets Jack answer the question for her. "The Chesapeake Ripper tried to attack her."

Hannibal raises his eyebrows. "Tried?" he echoes.

"We don't know he was the Ripper," Beverly corrects Jack, smoothly.

“Come on, Beverly,” says Jack. “Freddie Lounds runs a story naming you as one of the investigators on the Ripper case, and suddenly an unidentified man jumps you a block away from the Baltimore Field Office?”

“Well,” says Bev, shrugging her uninjured shoulder, “when you put it like that.”

Will rubs between his eyes. “What exactly happened?”

“I was walking to my car when he came at me from behind.” Beverly gestures at the swollen cut on the side of her head. “I don’t know what he hit me with, but he did it hard and fast. I was pretty disoriented, so I’m not sure what happened next. I know he took my gun, but I fought him and he dropped it. Then he tried to drag me into his van, but I stuck him in the thigh with my car key. Got away long enough to trigger a car alarm, and the noise spooked him. By the time I even thought about memorizing his license plate, he was driving away.”

“You had a nasty knock to the head,” Jack says consolingly. “You kept your cool, Bev. You did great.”

Beverly doesn’t settle for the compliments. Instead she makes a big show of trying to remember the color, make, and model of the van. Will watches her and sees a design forming. Again he glances at Hannibal (who does not appear to be concealing a wound on his thigh), and sees on the other man’s face an expression identical to his own, a look of calculation, perplexity and faint amusement. Hannibal becomes aware of Will watching him and the expression disappears, like a stone sinking into the deep.

“Did you get a look at his face?” Alana asks Beverly.

She shakes her head. “He was wearing a balaclava. White guy, average height and build, dark eyes. It’s not much help. But what I do have is his blood on my car key. Hopefully it’ll give us something to go on. ”

“I’m glad you’re ok,” Alana says, and after a moment of deliberation she comes forward and gives Beverly a hug.

“Amazing, isn’t it?” Jack says, proudly. “That she got away so lightly.”

“Incredible,” says Hannibal, without inflection.

“The Ripper isn’t used to dealing with someone with Beverly’s level of training,” Jack says. “He got a jump on her, but she got one back at him. She surprised him. And he hasn’t dropped a body since the attack. I think she rattled him. She might have stopped his spree.”

“I hope so,” says Beverly, who is looking at Hannibal again. “But we can’t be certain he won’t try something like that again.”

With sudden and perfect clarity Will sees the endpoint Bev has been steering towards. Fast as lightning he switches personas. He crosses his arms, leans against the bars, and again becomes the expert consultant, relaxed, businesslike, and about to deliver an unbiased opinion.

He says: “The Chesapeake Ripper wanted to kill one of yours, Jack. He wanted to hurt you, the same way he hurt you when he killed Miriam Lass. And Freddie Lounds gave him exactly what he needed to make it happen. She printed the names of all the major players in the investigation. Now he has that list, he can take his pick.”

Jack nods grimly. “Freddie Lounds has a lot to answer for. I can’t risk leaving any of my people out there without cover, so everyone whose name she printed is getting a protective detail courtesy of the Security Division.”

“These four are mine,” Beverly says, pointing behind her at the men all built like linebackers.

“Zeller and Price are covered, and I’ll have a team with me from this moment on,” says Jack. “I’m assigning Rutgers and Rezchek to you, Hannibal.”

Will turns to Hannibal expectantly and is gratified to witness a shadow descending over the other man’s face. “You need not waste your resources on me, Jack,” he says.

Jack tries for an indulgent smile, but he’s clearly losing patience. “Now you’re not scoring any points by being gallant. Your name was in that article same as ours, Hannibal, and you’re a member of this investigation. You’re getting protection, I insist on it.”

Beverly and Will glance at each other, eyes glittering.

Hannibal remains adamant. “If the Chesapeake Ripper is targeting FBI agents, then he presents very little danger to me.”

“Hannibal…” Alana shakes her head bemusedly. “There’s a serial killer on the loose who has a list with your name on it.”

“I can take care of myself,” Hannibal says, raising his chin.

Jack rolls his eyes. “Whether you like it or not, you’re taking Rutgers and Rezchek with you when you leave this hospital. They’re two of the best; they’re gonna be very discreet. Your patients won’t even notice they’re there and probably neither will you. They won’t interfere with your daily life or inconvenience you in any way, I promise.”

Hannibal is taking slow breaths through his nose.

“Dr. Lecter,” Will says, with a mask of solicitousness over his glee, “you’re always the first to offer help when others need it. Now you have to accept our help in return. Admit it, you need protection…*around the clock*.”

Hannibal says nothing. The fingers of his left hand are spasming.

“Let us protect you,” says Jack.

“If you insist,” Hannibal says, quietly. “Thank you, Jack, for taking the trouble.”

“Good man.” And Jack thumps Hannibal’s shoulder. “You know it’s no trouble. I’m going to sleep a lot sounder knowing they’re with you.”

“I know I will,” says Will.

Hannibal excuses himself not long after, claiming he needs time to prepare for his first patient of the day. He says his goodbyes with unfailing politeness, but Will can feel violence pounding underneath every pleasantry he utters. Even Hannibal’s immaculate control has its limits, and they are fast approaching. He stops in front of Beverly, looming like a specter.

“I am pleased to see you safe,” he says. “And with these gentlemen’s assistance, it seems likely we will all remain that way.”

“Uh huh,” says Bev, unshakable.

Hannibal avoids Will’s eyes until the last possible second, but he can’t leave without a glance. Will has been waiting. He gives Hannibal a wave, wiggling his fingers ironically, and the lids of Hannibal’s eyes slip slowly downward. He turns to leave, the two agents following him out—and it is the most glorious of glorious sights.

Will is desperate for a chance to talk to Beverly alone, but he doesn’t get the opportunity until almost an hour later, when Jack and Alana leave to take a meeting with Dr. Chilton. Beverly, equally eager for a private chat, sends her protective detail out for coffee and sidles up to the bars. Underneath her grin Will senses trepidation.

He points at the cut on her temple. “Pipe?”

“Leather sap,” she says, and points at her left arm in its sling. “And this was from a beanbag gun. Both were courtesy of a guy I know in ballistics. It’s his blood on the keys, too. He had way too much fun helping me out with this, it was kind of alarming, but don’t worry, he’ll stay quiet. He owes me a huge favor.”

“He’s not the only one,” says Will. “Beverly, you’re a genius.”

She smiles. “I know.”

Will is still putting it all together. “So does this mean you were the leak? You gave that list of names to Freddie Lounds?”

She looks a little offended. “I gave her the list, but I wasn’t the original leak. I wouldn’t do that to Jack. I don’t know who else was talking to Lounds last night, but whoever they are, I’m grateful for the inspiration. I needed a believable reason for the Ripper to come after me, and Freddie Lounds provided me with one only minutes after I emailed her my anonymous tip. Gotta hand it to Lounds, she works fast.”

Will shakes his head, beyond impressed.

“I told you there were other ways of stopping Lecter,” she says.

“You did.” And some of Will’s warmth disappears. “But you should have told me what you were going to do. I thought…” He swallows. “Well, you know what I thought.”

“Yeah…” Suddenly Beverly looks a little ashamed of herself. “Guess that wasn’t the nicest thing I’ve ever done, huh? I was just sick of watching you play the World’s Largest Chess Game, especially when it became clear I was just a piece on the board.”

He winces. “You’re more than that, Beverly.”

He shifts, wanting so badly to be sincere, to be himself, but the persona—for now even honesty has become a persona—fits him strangely, loosely, all awkward angles. He has spent too much time pretending.

“You were right,” he says. “About me, I mean. I was losing perspective back there. He makes me lose perspective. But you woke me up. And I shouldn’t take you on a guilt trip for that, not when I was the one who risked your life for real.”

She takes a step closer to the bars. “I risk my own life, Will. I risk it every day. You don’t have to apologize.”

“Well, neither do you.”

“Ok,” she says. “So we’re agreed: neither of us *has* to apologize, but both of us are gonna do it anyway.”

Will smiles. “Sorry.”

She smiles back. “Sorry.”

“Beverly, I don’t deserve you.”

“Shut up,” she says. “You do.”

Baltimore waits on tenterhooks for the Ripper to strike again. Jack and the BAU make regular visits to Will’s cell throughout the day, but with little to report. Hannibal doesn’t reappear at all; probably too busy plotting ways to shrug off his protective detail. Beverly’s plan has done the trick. The body count stays at eight. All is quiet in the Chesapeake Bay. The spree appears to be over.

Beverly returns to Will’s cell in the late afternoon. “Look what I’ve got,” she says, and with her uninjured hand she pulls out a stumpy silver key, ludicrously ordinary looking. “I’m the proud new owner of a secure unit at Elite Storage Solutions in West York, Pennsylvania.”

“Congratulations,” says Will.

“I’m thinking Rezchek and Rutgers aren’t gonna stop Lecter for long. We should take advantage of this time and get to that storage unit before he can give his protective detail the

slip and dump more bodies. You're sure there's more where those came from, right?"

"Pretty sure. Only two of the eight bodies from the spree were frozen, and neither of them was Miriam Lass."

"Definitely not. We have Miriam's prints on file, and both those frozen bodies are still unidentified. Actually we haven't been able to identify any of the spree victims yet."

"One of them is du Maurier," says Will.

"We *suspect* one of them is du Maurier," Beverly corrects him. "We can't know for sure. They're gonna have to go by dental records to identify them. It could take weeks. Jack's not happy about that."

"I bet." Will sighs.

Beverly looks suddenly bright-eyed, devious. "He's coming here at six with Price and Zeller for a full briefing. Lecter will be there. So… I'm thinking I should hit him then. Pickpocket him, I mean."

"What, tonight?" Will's mouth drops open. "In the middle of the briefing?"

"Why not? Strength in numbers! The briefing should keep him good and distracted, and besides, I'd much rather be sticking my hand in Lecter's pocket while we're all surrounded by bodyguards."

"You have a point there. But Beverly, I think you're forgetting something. *You only have one hand*."

She shrugs with her usable shoulder. "I'm a southpaw. I only need my left."

"That's insane."

"Says the man in the insane asylum. Awww..." And she cocks her head, considering him. "Will, are you worried about me?"

"Of course I am," he says, a little embarrassed. "I just spent half of last night thinking you were dead. I don't care to repeat that experience."

"You won't have to." Beverly flicks the key between her fingers, a deft flash of metal against skin. "Trust me, ok? I can do this."

He wants to believe her so very, very badly.

In preparation for the briefing, Barney unfolds a line of chairs in front of Will's cell, and suddenly the tiny space feels like a little theater awaiting its audience. Beverly is first on the scene, her one functional hand buried nervously in the pocket of her coat. She must be

playing with the little key, practicing her sleight of hand. Can she ever be smooth enough to fool Hannibal Lecter?

Price and Zeller arrive with their respective security teams. Jack appears a little later, looking so completely exhausted that he appears diminished, less solid somehow. His voice has gone a little hoarse from all the shouting he's done the past twenty-fours hours, and he still hasn't stopped. He manages to have three loud phone conversations in three minutes as they wait for Hannibal to arrive for the briefing. But the next person to appear in the corridor isn't Hannibal, but Alana.

"What are you doing here?" Will asks.

"Jack asked me to be here," she says, nodding tersely at the man himself, who is leaning against the far wall as he talks on the phone.

"Does this mean you're back to consulting on the Ripper?" Beverly asks.

"Not officially," says Alana. "I admit it's hard to avoid this particular investigation with both Will and Hannibal consulting on it, but I have another obligation I'd describe as pressing."

Will looks at her questioningly, and she sighs. "Your *trial*. It's on Tuesday."

"This Tuesday?" Will has completely forgotten. "Oh."

"'Oh' indeed," says Alana. "Someone's going to have to prepare for it, and I'm thinking that someone probably isn't going to be you."

"Uh," says Will.

He doesn't get the chance to defend himself, because at that moment the corridor gate rolls back and Hannibal appears, flanked by Rutgers and Rezchek. He has made up for his rumpled appearance of the night before by paying even more meticulous attention to his wardrobe than usual. Not a hair is out of place and his cream-colored suit emits a sumptuous glow from underneath his camel hair coat.

Will can feel Beverly tensing, steeling herself as she performs an instantaneous visual reconnaissance of her mark. As Hannibal finishes greeting Jack and Alana, he removes his coat and folds it carefully over the back of one of the chairs. Beverly's eyebrows leap and she throws a delighted look at Will. How much easier it will be, pickpocketing a chair.

Jack finishes with his phone call. "Let's get started," he says.

He sends out to the orderly station the various milling members of everyone's protective details, so that the BAU might have some privacy and space for the briefing. They take their seats. Beverly acts quickly and sits down on Hannibal's immediate right, while Alana takes the chair on his left. Will pulls his own chair up to the bars and sits at its edge. Meanwhile Jack prowls in the empty space between the line of watching people and the bars of Will's cell.

“I received something very interesting in the mail today.” He holds up a padded express mailer. “No return address. No contaminants. No fingerprints. Guess what’s inside.”

Jack doesn’t wait for them to guess. Instead he dumps the contents of the envelope on to Zeller’s lap. Zeller stares down at the heap of leather.

“Uh,” he says, “wallets?”

“Wallets,” agrees Jack. “Eight of ‘em.”

“The bodies from the spree,” Will says. “The Ripper is identifying his victims for us.”

“That’s surprisingly helpful of him,” says Price, wide-eyed.

Hannibal, who has his hands politely folded in his lap, ghosts a smile. (Beverly stares at his coat through the sides of her eyes.)

“Who were they?” Will asks quietly.

Jack reads out the names of the victims: “*Dr.* Avery Hauser, *Dr.* Paul Lubbock, *Dr*. Redford Josephs, *Dr*. Daniel Epstein, *Dr*. Arianna Ruiz, *Dr.* Delores Burns, *Dr*. Emily Lin, and *Dr*. Bethany-Ann Manson.” He looks up, grimly. “Notice anything?”

Zeller toys with the wallets in his lap. “They’re… all doctors.”

“Yes,” says Jack, sarcastically, “they are.” And he turns on Will.

“You told me one of these people had a personal connection to the Ripper,” he says, aggressively.

“That was Dr. Lecter’s theory actually,” says Will. He speaks quietly, distractedly; he is still processing the fact that Bedelia du Maurier’s wallet was not in Jack’s envelope.

Meanwhile Jack rounds on Hannibal. “How am I supposed to know which one? I’ve got eight doctors here, all from the Baltimore area. We believe the Ripper was once a doctor from the Baltimore area. We trace the contacts of each of these victims and we’re gonna end up with a list of just about every person who’s ever practiced medicine in the Baltimore area!”

“That does seem likely,” says Hannibal, apologetically. (Beverly watches him, her hand twitching nervously in her lap.)

Jack’s expression darkens. “I thought we’d come out of this with something solid on the Ripper. Something I could use to narrow down the field. But even after tonight, even after his so-called ‘spree’, we are no closer to understanding who this guy is or how he works. He is ten moves ahead of us—perpetually ten moves ahead. He killed six people last night. In addition he dumped two bodies.” He waves the express mailer like a battle flag. “He is mocking us. He has always been mocking us, and I for one am sick of it.”

“We all are, Jack,” says Beverly.

(She shifts on her chair, moving slightly closer to Hannibal.)

“Meanwhile,” Jack continues, “I got a leak I can’t seem to patch. Freddie Lounds was crawling over every crime scene last night like white on rice. I made a statement, off the cuff, that somehow managed to make it on to TattleCrime.com an hour later. Somebody’s been talking to Lounds and I wanna know who that somebody is.”

At this, Hannibal finds Will’s eyes and if Will had any doubts before, they all disappear now. Hannibal has been leaking information to Freddie Lounds.

(Beverly reaches down, scratching an itch on her pant leg.)

Jack continues lecturing them about loose lips’ propensity to sink ships; it’s clear to Will that Jack suspects, or is at least worried by the possibility, that the person who has passed information to Freddie Lounds is currently inside this room. Zeller and Price both look pretty twitchy at being spoken to like this. Thankfully Beverly is too distracted by Hannibal right now to look guilty. Alana looks stern and annoyed at even being included in this covert interrogation. Meanwhile the leak himself sits upright and alert in his chair.

(Beverly’s itch is scratched; she straightens up, empty-handed.)

They take a short break for Jack to make a phone call. Jack obviously intends the leak to stew in guilt for a while, until he or she is driven to confess. Hannibal and Alana stay seated, speaking quietly together. Beverly comes over to Will and whispers, almost inaudibly, “This is impossible. Every time I thought about trying something, I could feel him…watching me. I feel like he’s watching me *now*. He never stops.”

Will nods, unsurprised. “He’s not an easy mark. We need to distract him.”

Beverly’s face looks strained, desperate. “How?”

“Leave it to me.”

She does not look happy about this.

“You say I have control over him,” Will continues. “And maybe you’re right. I can’t command him to stop killing, but I can command his attention for at least a minute. Trust me, Bev.”

When they reconvene, Jack immediately asks: “So…any of you want to tell me something?”

Will clears his throat. “I do.”

Jack raises his eyebrows. Will hates Freddie Lounds, wasn't on any of the crime scenes, and doesn't have access to a phone; he's not exactly a likely leak.

"What is it, Will?"

"I have a theory about the identity of the Chesapeake Ripper."

Will's voice is strong, confident, though he is determinedly not looking at Hannibal.

(Meanwhile Beverly is watching Will, eyes bright, expectant.)

Jack stares. "Go ahead."

"You may have heard a woman disappeared last night," Will says. "I thought she might be one of the spree victims, but that's not looking likely now we have their wallets. Her name was Dr. Bedelia du Maurier."

"I know about Dr. du Maurier," says Jack, with a swift look at Hannibal.

"I informed Jack of Dr. du Maurier's disappearance," says Hannibal, with sorrowful dignity.

"It can't be a coincidence," says Will, "that du Maurier disappears on the same night as the Ripper's murder spree."

Hannibal's fingers close around his knees, he is suddenly thrumming with nervous energy. (And Beverly's left hand drifts down, down, towards the pocket of his coat.)

"What are you suggesting?" Jack asks. "That du Maurier was also killed by the Chesapeake Ripper, but he hasn't had the chance to dump her body?"

"That's not what I'm suggesting," says Will. And now he looks at Hannibal. "What if Dr. Chilton was right about the Ripper? What if this spree really is his final masterpiece? His last hurrah? His Ninth Symphony? One final chance to fool the FBI, to publicly embarrass Jack, to get rid of whatever bodies he's been hanging on to all these years? And once he's finished, once the spree is over, the Ripper retires. No more murders, at least not in the Chesapeake Bay."

Hannibal stands up slowly, his eyes boring into Will. (Beverly's hand dips into the coat pocket.)

"Maybe," says Will, "the Ripper has already left Baltimore. Picked up sticks and packed *her* bags."

"Bedelia du Maurier has nothing to do with this," says Hannibal, in a voice low and envenomed.

(Beverly removes her hand from her coat and throws Will a frustrated look—no keys.)

Jack meanwhile is electrified. "Du Maurier's a shut-in," he says. "Or at least, she's let the world believe she's a shut-in. No alibis for any of the murders, and ample opportunity to

commit them. I gotta admit, the few times I interviewed her, I knew she wasn't being straight with me. She provided only grudging cooperation. She was hiding something. I'm certain of that."

(Beverly leans over, trying surreptitiously to reach with her left hand into the left pocket of Hannibal's coat. It's further away from her, a real stretch.)

"Bedelia had her secrets," says Hannibal, who doesn't notice anything of what's happening behind him, "but she was not a serial killer."

"But how can you be sure?" Jack asks. "As for me, I find it hard to accept a woman that small could have butchered over twenty people, but it isn't outside the realm of possibility. What do you really know about her, Hannibal? Do you know if she had surgical training?"

Hannibal doesn't answer the question. "I was very close with Bedelia du Maurier. I was keenly aware of who she was, and of what she was capable. I know without a doubt she is not the Chesapeake Ripper."

"You were her patient," Will says. "And psychiatrists don't tell their patients everything. You know that, Doctor. You know that very well."

Hannibal's eyelids slide lower.

(Beverly straightens up again. She displays for Will her empty hand. No keys in either of Hannibal's pockets. They've hit a dead end.)

If the keys aren't in Hannibal's coat, then there is only one other place they could be. Will glances at Hannibal's suit jacket. There is a slight bulge in his right pocket; he should have noticed sooner. Hannibal's suit is fitted to a T. It will be all but impossible to reach into that pocket without him noticing, even if Will accuses his dead sister of being the Chesapeake Ripper.

(Beverly throws Will a look of frustration and helplessness. She's asking what to do.)

Will can't answer her, because suddenly Hannibal is staring at him in something like alarm. Clocking the drift of Will's eyes, Hannibal has become aware of the silent messages passing back and forth over his shoulder. He half-turns, looking for Will's conversation partner.

Ok, Will thinks, in blind and breathless panic, *Plan B*.

He reaches through the bars.

For a bare instant, no one notices anything has happened. Jack continues talking, constructing various scenarios in which Bedelia du Maurier could be the Chesapeake Ripper. Even Hannibal doesn't immediately register the change in his circumstances. His head tilts very slowly down and he stares at Will's hand fisted around the creamy lapel of his suit jacket. He blinks at this hand as if he has never seen one before, a look of fond puzzlement settling over him. He looks back up at Will and smiles, faintly. *What are you up to?*

Will returns the smile. Then he yanks back on his fistful of fabric and smashes Hannibal's face into the bars of his cell.

Alana gasps. Jack screams, "WHAT THE—"

Everyone is stunned, Hannibal most of all. No one intervenes as Will thrusts both arms out, spinning Hannibal around until his back is to bars. With one arm he grabs Hannibal's chest; the other he wraps around his throat, Will's bicep pressing into Hannibal's windpipe, the bars digging painfully between them.

"Will, stop it!"

"Get help! Now!"

"Let him go, Will!"

Hands reach out, trying to rip Hannibal from Will's grasp. "No," says Will. "No no no no no." His shoulder joint burns at the terrible stretch, but he hangs on for all he's worth, so that the people attempting to part him and Hannibal only succeed in throttling Hannibal further. Hannibal kicks weakly at the floor, trying to regain his balance.

The other inmates are hooting gleefully, banging at the bars in solidarity. "Get him, Graham!" they chant. "Get him, Graham! Get him, Graham!"

Will grapples at Hannibal's chest, hooks his fingers around the right pocket of Hannibal's jacket. A harsh noise of ripping fabric—he tears the pocket clear off the jacket, and Hannibal's keychain falls with a clatter to the floor. Will can't see Beverly, he doesn't know if she's making the switch—he can't see much of anything besides red rage and the side of Hannibal's face, pressed up close to his.

Jack appears right in Will's eye line, his face a frozen mask of shock. "WILL, LET HIM GO."

"I can't do that, Jack," says Will. "Sorry. You wanted me to catch the Chesapeake Ripper, didn't you? Well, I've got him now."

Hannibal's hands come up to grip Will's arm. He isn't trying to throw off Will's hold—he's steadying him. Urging him on.

At this moment a distant, increasingly dormant part of Will understands that if Hannibal approves of what Will is doing, it would be safer and wiser for Will to stop doing it immediately. But he can't stop. He will never stop. He doesn't care if Beverly makes the switch. The key doesn't matter. The storage unit doesn't matter, not if Hannibal is dead. Nothing matters now except Will's arm around Hannibal's throat, the strange possessive clutch of Hannibal's fingers around Will's elbow, the little grunts of air forced out of Hannibal's nose as Will relentlessly squeezes the life out of him.

"If no one will stop you," Will wheezes, "then I will…"

Hannibal's grip on Will's arm begins to slacken. Will's heart is singing, singing in his chest, an aria of rage and wild joy. He isn't aware of himself anymore. He cannot hear himself laughing.

The rolling thunder of footsteps approaching. A horde of orderlies closing in. Barney is unlocking the cell door with one hand, aiming a plastic tranquilizer gun with the other. Will has only seconds left. Hannibal is still awake, still holding Will's arm. There isn't enough time left to kill him. How disappointing.

An urge slinks out from the darkest recesses of Will's mind—a sharp-clawed, red-eyed urge, searing and famished and undeniable.

"Something to remember me by," he gasps in Hannibal's ear. And as Barney throws open the door of his cell, Will lunges forward, presses his own forehead against the bars, and sinks his teeth into the sculpted flesh of Hannibal's cheek.

A chorus of screams.

Hannibal makes a noise in his throat, *huk*. A torrent of hot copper in Will's ravening mouth. He feels a sharp burn in his arm where Barney's tranquilizer dart has hit home. Orderlies tackle him from every direction and finally Will is forced to let Hannibal go. The whole world knocked askew. Will lands face first on the floor and bites his tongue. Suddenly he can taste his own blood mingling with Hannibal's, an effervescent sweetness on his palate.

Hannibal staggers, one trembling hand cupping his cheek. Blood slides down his neck, staining the collar and shoulders of his impeccable suit. Alana and Beverly rush forward, but Hannibal's knees hit the floor before they can catch him. He sways, his face deathly white.

This is the final tableau Will sees before he fades away: Jack standing far back, arms raised protectively to his chest, shaking his head as if denying the reality of the events he has just witnessed; Zeller and Price frozen and goggling like age-old sculptures; Alana and Beverly kneeling over Hannibal, both women's faces twisted with dumb horror; and Hannibal, half collapsed, visibly shaking, staring at Will not in shock but in rapture.

Will says a silent goodbye to his career as an FBI consultant before he passes out.

Chapter 22

Chapter Summary

Will wakes up in hell.

Pounding footsteps. Alarms wailing. The long echoes of screams. A cacophony of sounds fading slowly into silence as he runs barefoot across the lawn of the Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane and crashes into the thorny undergrowth of the forest beyond its borders. They won't find him in here.

The forest is dense, soundproofed, a perpetual nighttime enduring underneath the heavy canopy of leaves. Bracing himself between two trees, he catches his breath as his sweat-slicked shoulders quake and shudder. His feet are bleeding, and there are cuts on his fingers too, little cuts that sting against the rough bark. Meanwhile the taste of blood still lingers in his mouth, copper-rich. The dark forest closes in, the trees' shadows creeping over him, elongating and narrowing like prison bars. He runs again.

But as he runs he realizes he is not alone in the forest. Every sound he makes is doubled, every movement mirrored by a presence that watches him, follows him, lurking out of sight.

He freezes, a hunted animal instinctively cloaking himself in silence and stillness. He can still feel it, whatever it is, matching him breath for breath.

He narrows his eyes, scents the air. The darkness thins to blue, and in between two twisted trees he glimpses the spindly outline of the creature that was once the black-feathered stag, its shoulders hunched and eyes agleam. It snorts: in every tree the leaves shiver. Will shivers, too, and in his mouth the taste of blood intensifies.

The stag turns slowly, deliberately, and slouches back into the darkness. Will, stepping carefully so as not to make a sound, follows after. He is unsure whether the stag is hunting him, or he it, but he knows he must keep the creature in sight or risk losing it forever.

He pursues the stag through endless gnarled corridors, and in terrified deference the other animals scuttle back into their dens, surrendering the forest to these creatures of a higher, deadlier order. Will loses track of whether he is running after the stag or running *with* it. His throat becomes raw from desperate breath, and just at the moment when he feels he can't go

on, he breaks through a thicket and emerges into a rounded clearing. The moon shines down on the grass, as bright and focused as a spotlight.

But the clearing is empty. The stag is gone. Will shudders to a stop. The moonlight hits him, glazing his hair and skin in brilliant silver as he spins in place, scanning the tree line. Where did the stag go? Why did it abandon him here? He tries to summon it back, but the creature won't heed his calls. Standing in the center of the empty clearing, he dips his head, bereft.

But then the copper taste quickens on his tongue, sugar-tinged, unbearably rich. Its liquid warmth slides down his throat, coursing through his veins faster than his own blood flows. The foreign matter insinuates itself throughout his body, creeping into marrow and organs and muscle and thought, weaving around every part of him like spider silk about a fly, and once he is entwined, it goes to work. A fissure opens up inside him—he screams—his bones scrape together with arthritic pops and creaks, jutting through his skin, tearing apart the fabric of his jumpsuit. His muscles on fire, melting and reconstituting just as iron is smelted into steel. His ribs wither until they almost crush his lungs, tendons snapping like broken rigging on a sailboat. Cataclysmic pain in his temples, worse than any headache, pain so bad it brings him to his punctured knees; he clutches his head and feels bony protrusions bursting out of his skull, clawing their way out of him, out and out and out and out and out. Antlers. Black blood pours down his face, painting his hide, and before his reddening eyes, his fingers break and reshape themselves, sharpening, lengthening, claws flexing...

He doesn't scream any more. Now he howls. He howls because he has become the very thing he fears, and he howls because he doesn't mind. He doesn't mind. More than that, he welcomes his transformation. He loves it! Howling in triumphant pain, in painful triumph, the stag stands resplendent in the moonlight, which blasts down in a concentrated beam of quicksilver brighter than a searchlight. Its scorching whiteness blots out the clearing, blots out the forest. Blots him out, too. Everything white. White, white, white, pristine white and silence. And then the silence is rent by a terrible voice, a godawful hollering of trite and tinny rage.

"*...BUT KNOW THIS: RETRIBUTION IS A TRAP LAID FOR YOU BY THE DEVIL, ITS PURPOSE THE COMPLETE DEFILEMENT OF MANKIND. TO EMBARK ON A COURSE OF EARTHLY VENGEANCE IS TO TREAD THROUGH HELLFIRE AND BRIMSTONE UNTIL YOU ARE CONSUMED BY THE UNQUENCHABLE FLAMES. FOR WHATEVER GRIEF LIES UPON YOUR BREAST, WHATEVER CRIMES YOUR ENEMY HAS COMMITTED AGAINST YOU, YOU MUST ENDEAVOR TO FORGIVE HIM. YES, I SAY—FORGIVE HIM...*"

He tries to cover his ears. Can't. He groans. Opens his eyes. Doesn't help; he still can't see. Everything is white and slow.

The voice screams on. Its high tones like a hammer slamming down on him. His tender insides reverberate with every blow. Where is he? Who is yelling at him? What has he done to deserve this?

His eyes stream, not from emotion—he doesn't feel much of anything right now except raw confusion—but from the sting of the fluorescent overheads. Everything is too bright, too

loud. Even breathing is harder than it should be: something is strapped across his head, pressing on his nose and mouth. With every breath he tastes damp plastic.

The jeremiad continues:

"...YOU MUST FORGIVE HIM AND FEED HIM, PROVIDE HIM WITH SHELTER AND SHOW HIM MERCY, AND BY YOUR BESTOWING OF KINDNESS UNTO HIM, IT SHALL BE AS IF YOU HEAP BURNING COALS UPON HIS HEAD..."

His body feels too heavy to move. He can't do much more than twitch. It takes him a long time to understand that he is lying curled up around himself on a white quilted floor, his arms locked across his chest—a straitjacket. Like a beached fish he flops and slaps his legs, trying to get up. His muscles are slow to obey his commands; he feels off-kilter, uncoordinated, full of an underwater lethargy that can only mean he has been drugged up to his ears again.

"*…THERE CAN BE NO PLACE FOR WRATH INSIDE YOUR HEART. LEAVE WRATH TO HEAVEN…"*

Eventually he figures out how to propel himself along with his bare feet. He wriggles into a corner and props his back against the wall, just about sitting up. His vision is so blurry he's seeing three of everything. When it clears a little, he takes stock of his surroundings.

Obviously he has been removed from his cell. He is now in a little chamber with three padded walls. The fourth is glass and steel, with a sliding tray for food and a door that boasts a lock the size of a truck tire. His whole world has gone soft-edged; there isn't a hard corner in this room that isn't padded. Nothing here but a cot, a sink, and a toilet. No desk. No files, photos, or books. All his privileges—those little privileges he's been taking for granted—all of them gone. The Lord giveth, etc.

Speaking of the Lord… Will locates the source of the evangelical diatribe. Beyond the glass wall of his new cage, an old television sits on a wheeled cart, its picture over-bright, its volume turned up past the point of distortion. It blares and blares, nightmarish. On the screen a preacher thrashes his arms in ecstatic fury as he reaches the apex of his sermon:

"...VENGEANCE IS MINE, SAYS THE LORD. I SHALL REPAY!"

And a new voice speaks, its conversational tone belied by its owner having to shout in order to be heard over the television:

"Who'd'ja bite?"

Maybe it's the drugs, but this voice rings familiar. Will pushes against the corner, groping for purchase with his numb feet, and once he's completely upright he hobbles to the glass, squinting into the corridor beyond his chamber. The floor is greenish linoleum, the walls dark with mold. He's even deeper underground than before, exiled to the subbasement.

"I said, who'd'ja bite?"

Whatever sedative they've given him is very strong. Will's legs give out and he slides down the glass until he hits the floor, slouching awkwardly like a puppet with its strings cut. He raises his head, looks past the television, and finally locates his questioner.

In the cell diagonally opposite to his own, Dr. Abel Gideon sits cross-legged on the floor, framed in the exact center of his observation window. He has his bright little eyes locked on Will.

"Howdy," Dr. Gideon says, and waves.

Will can't exactly wave back. He just stares at Gideon, transfixed by this unexpected visit from the Ghost of Christmas Past.

"Fancy meeting you here, Mr. Graham."

Will concentrates hard, trying to speak. He doesn't recognize the sound of his own voice: it is slurred, distant, muffled by the plastic thing strapped over his face.

"What…are you…doing here?"

"Now don't you think that's a question I should really be asking *you*?" Gideon throws back his head, favors Will with a hyena-like laugh. "So—who'd'ja bite?"

"Who says…I bit…anyone?"

Gideon lifts a finger and traces a shape across the lower part of his face. "Frederick only breaks out the bondage gear for the biters."

Will twitches his face, feeling the shape and press of the plastic mask across his cheeks. So he's been muzzled like a dog.

"It's a good look on you," Gideon assures him. "It's your curse, Mr. Graham, to have been born with a kind face. A gentle face. People look at a face like that and think they can take advantage of it. Not so much now, though. Now you look…heh…shall we say, *unapproachable*?"

Will says nothing. The full force of his predicament is becoming known to him. All his files: gone. His means of investigating Hannibal: removed. His contact with the outside world: probably regulated to the point of nonexistence. He has been tranquilized, trussed up, and buried alive in the lowest basement with the rest of the undesirables. Abandon hope all ye who enter here. He is fucked.

"Now don't be shy," wheedles Gideon. "Who'd'ja bite?"

"My… psychiatrist."

And Gideon cracks up. "Your *psychiatrist*? Oh ho ho, what *were* you thinking? Not very smart, Mr. Graham, not smart at all. The administrator of this good institution does not look kindly on people biting their psychiatrists; no siree, he does not approve of that kind of aberrant behavior. He's fine with the other kinds of aberrant behavior, but biting your

psychiatrist is a no-no. You should have picked someone else to chew on. Another inmate, perhaps. Or your lawyer." His eyes are gleaming brighter than the television. "Was it Frederick you bit? Tell me it was Frederick."

Will shakes his head, and the sedative makes the world shake too.

"Too bad," sighs Gideon. "Frederick could use a good bite." He schools his expression into one of exaggerated thoughtfulness. "Why are you going around biting people, anyway? I didn't think that was your M.O. Aren't you more of a straight shooter? Well, maybe not so straight, or else I wouldn't be here. You remember shooting me, don't you?"

Will stares at Gideon flatly, unblinkingly. "You had… it coming."

Gideon raises his eyebrows. "Well…can't argue with you there. Tell me, did Eldon have it coming? You remember Eldon, don't you? You arrested him for mass murder, I believe. Hey Eldon, didn't Will Graham shoot you, too?"

"Shot me in the arm!" a cheerful voice calls from the cell next to Gideon's. Eldon Stammets shuffles up to the glass, a ghastly grin on his long face. "Hello, Will," he says.

Of course, thinks Will. *Why not*. This nightmare obeys a dream logic in which he is well versed.

"Hello… Mr. Stammets," he rasps, conversationally, through his mask.

"We all wondered when we would be seeing you down here," says Stammets.

"Who's… we?"

"The gang," says Gideon, gesturing grandly.

"Me, Abel, and Lawrence." Stammets points a finger against the glass. "That's Lawrence Wells in the next cell down from you." He raises his voice. "Say hello to Will Graham, Lawrence!"

"FUCK OFF," a hoarse voice shouts from out of sight.

Stammets cringes. "Don't mind him. He's been grouchy ever since he got here."

Gideon chuckles. "Something about accidentally murdering the son he never knew he had. Tragic stuff."

Stammets shakes his head, eyes moist and martyred. "I keep telling you, Lawrence, I keep telling you: death is not the end. You can see your son again; connection is still possible, more than possible—inevitable! You only have to overcome the chains that bind you to this worldly plane."

"FUCK OFF," says Lawrence Wells.

Gideon rolls his eyes. “Eldon has discovered religion,” he says to Will. “I keep telling Frederick the idiot box is a negative influence. We’re all so very impressionable down here.”

Stammets shrugs. “I’d rather take solace in the miracle of mycelia, but in this place beggars can’t be choosers.”

“I hear you, brother,” says Gideon, sarcastically.

Will blinks at the faces of this merry band of murderers, the safety glass and fluorescent lights washing the life from their skin, transforming them into the ranks of the undead. Meanwhile the televised preacher howls and howls, invoking the wrath of God and the temptations of Satan. What are the odds that this subbasement cellblock should be entirely populated by killers whose minds Will has inhabited? Who else is down here? Elliot Buddish? Tobias Budge? Garret Jacob Hobbs? Why not? Why not?

Gideon is eerily attuned to Will’s train of thought. “It’s funny you ended up down here. In the naughty corner with the rest of us freaks. Someone upstairs must have a healthy sense of irony, huh?”

“Are you referring to God?” Eldon asks him.

“No, Eldon,” says Gideon, in a long-suffering voice. “I am not referring to God. I am referring to Frederick Chilton. Big difference.”

“This wasn’t…Chilton’s idea,” says Will, working it out as he speaks.

Gideon looks intrigued. “Whose was it, then?”

“My psychi…atrist’s. The one… I bit.”

“Oh….” And Gideon nods with sudden understanding. “I should have figured. You bit the Transylvanian.” And to Stammets, “You remember me telling you about the Transylvanian.”

“Sure,” says Stammets. “The bloodsucker.”

Will can’t have heard them right. “What are you…talking about?”

“The Transylvanian,” Gideon repeats. “You took me to meet him, remember?” He sighs at the baffled look on Will’s face. “You don’t remember. That’s ok. You weren’t yourself at the time. I wasn’t myself either. Neither of us was sure who we were, so you took us to the Transylvanian, I guess because you were under the impression he was the kind of person you could trust to tell you what was what. But you’ve got that face, that unfortunate kind little face, and he took advantage of it. Oh boy, did he. You know, for a criminal profiler, you are not the greatest judge of character.”

Will’s heart has slipped out of the sedative’s grip and is now racing painfully. “Are you… telling me… you were there? That night… with Dr. Lecter?”

“Is that his name?” Gideon shrugs, unconcerned. “You had a seizure right in front of him and the guy didn’t bat an eyelash. Just stood back and watched you jerk around. Treated it like an

amusing diversion. Which it was. You made a lot of interesting noises. But still, with a doctor like that, no wonder you ended up in here. I've been saying for years, health care in this country has gone to the dogs. You really oughta make a switch. Why don't I give you a referral?"

Will isn't listening. He has only fragments of memory from the night in question: a jigsaw of strange impressions, the colors cranked up bright with fever. But Will's faulty memory is no impediment. Not any more. Now he can reconstruct memories even when his own recollection proves inadequate. It's as easy to him as breathing. He swings the pendulum; within the space of a blink he becomes Hannibal Lecter and with startling clarity the forgotten scene unfolds before his deadened eyes.

Abel Gideon, that pale imitation, conveyed right to his doorstep. Delivered up unto him by Will Graham, his excellent friend, now in the full throes of his debilitating illness and becoming dearer and more useful to him by the minute. He could kill Gideon in front of Will, and Will would not be cognizant enough to stop it. But he has no desire to kill Abel Gideon —it would be foolhardy in the extreme, and besides, Gideon on the loose is more interesting than Gideon bleeding on the floor of his dining room—but he does desire to see Abel Gideon dead. So why not let Will Graham do the work for him…

Will returns to himself and finds Abel Gideon alive and well and staring at him, his little eyes bright with sneering interest.

"Now *what* on *earth* was *that*?" he singsongs. "What did you just *do*?"

Will doesn't answer. "He sent you after Alana…" he mutters, more to himself than to Gideon. "He sent me after you…"

He turns away from the glass wall, molten fury coursing thickly through his sluggish veins. Just when he thought he had completely itemized the many crimes of Hannibal Lecter, a new violation comes to light. A moment ago he was just about ready to regret the attack, the bite, the resulting punishments he has brought down on himself. Now he's happy he did it. He'd do it again. They can strap him down, they can sedate him into catatonia, they can throw him into the darkest, most forgotten corner of this hospital—if given the chance he'd still bite Hannibal again. At least he got here on his own. His own actions have earned him this straitjacket and this mask—his own actions, not Hannibal's. That's something to be proud of.

"Yeah," says Gideon, still watching him, "unapproachable. Unapproachable, that's the word for you…"

It goes on an on, a merry-go-round of madness. Gideon keeps angling for a chat. Lawrence Wells experiences screaming fits ("FUCK OFF! FUCK OFF!"). Stammets sings old spirituals at the top of his voice. And all the while the preacher preaches on a loop. Will is insensible to all of it. Unable to summon the strength to climb in bed, he curls back up on the floor, where he oscillates between a haze of rage and a haze of sedation. Orderlies come in at one point—not Barney: two blank-faced giants with flabby forearms and bad breath—to feed Will

through a tube. A horrible demeaning experience, especially with Gideon providing play-by-play narration like some kind of demented golf commentator, but none of it makes much of an impression on Will, because he is too busy feeling violated by a memory from eight months ago. Hannibal, all solicitousness, gentle and concerned, asking him to raise his arms, asking him to smile. Well, damned if Will is smiling now…

The mask presses into him, the straitjacket envelopes him, the sedative seems only to build up stronger and stronger in his system. These instruments of ensnarement are consuming him. Underneath the brutal pressures they exert, he feels himself diminishing, his soft parts rubbed away until all that's left is the hard stuff, the magmatic rage swelling up inside him.

Time slides by at an immeasurable rate. The overhead lights never seem to dim. No one comes to see him. For all Will knows, he has been hogtied in this chamber for days, weeks, months. He doesn't care how long it's been. Why should there be any need for timekeeping in hell?

So he is mildly surprised when Jack's grim face swims into focus beyond the glass of his chamber, and he sees that Jack still has on the same suit and tie he was wearing when Will sank his teeth into Hannibal's face. Will hasn't even been in this subbasement cell the length of a day.

Chilton is with Jack, and he is discussing Will's case as if Will has suddenly become an infant or an inanimate object, something incapable of comprehension.

"A psychotic break," Chilton is saying. "Precipitated by the proximity of his court date, no doubt. I must admit, I'm not entirely surprised that something like this has happened. Will Graham's behavior was erratic the night of the Chesapeake Ripper's killing spree. He was behaving very strangely with Dr. Lecter in particular; there was a—uh—threatening air about him. I should have said something sooner."

Jack doesn't seem to be listening to Chilton. He is staring at Will, a look of blank shock inscribed on his heavy face. "Is all of this really necessary?" he asks, in a surprisingly small voice.

Chilton pretends to cringe in apology, a flimsy mask for his delight. "The restraints and the bite-guard are merely precautions. I'm sure you'll agree that the last thing we want is for him to do any further damage."

A little anger now creeps into Jack's empty voice. "But who's he supposed to bite inside the fish tank?"

"The orderlies," says Chilton, confidently. "Himself." And at Jack's arrested look, "Clearly you haven't seen his fingernails. They are a *fright*. He's been demonstrating a propensity towards self-mutilation for months. He has violent impulses, Agent Crawford, and nowhere to direct them. An explosion was inevitable."

It takes Jack a long time to speak; his Adam's apple bobs frantically in his throat. "Give us a moment," he says.

"I really should stay here and observe—"

"Give us a moment," Jack repeats, in a voice that brooks no objections. So Chilton scuttles off, veering away from Dr. Gideon's cell as Gideon croons: "Heeey Frederick! Heeeey! How're your guts doing this fine afternoon?"

Jack twists around, only now recognizing Gideon, who grins at him cheerfully.

"Your people are dropping like flies, Crawford! First the little trainee, and now your special crime consultant appears to have contracted an exotic case of rabies. Wonder who's next on the chopping block?"

Jack looks at Gideon for a long time—in the heaviest of heavy silences— before deciding to turn the other cheek. He can deal with only one psychopath at a time.

Instead Jack crouches near the glass of Will's cell, putting himself on the same level as Will, who sits hunched in the corner where the glass wall meets the padded one, head dropping sideways against the glass, eyes slitted open in a nowhere stare.

"Will? Will, can you hear me?"

Will doesn't make a move to open his eyes further or to turn towards Jack. But he speaks.

"Sorry, Jack…I've got no…further leads…on the Ripper…for you."

Jack looks relieved at this sign of life. "That's ok. I'm not here for information. I'm here to see how you're doing."

"I'm fine. A-ok."

Jack leans forward, the picture of paternal concern. But the picture is an effort for him to maintain; Will can feel the strain of it without even looking at Jack.

"You wanna talk about what happened back there?"

Will doesn't respond. He knows why Jack is here. Jack wants to see evidence that what happened to Will was just a passing fit, something that can be apologized for and brushed aside. Jack is here to reassure himself that Will is still the person Jack wants him to be.

"Come on, Will. I need you to talk about it. Why'd you do it? Why'd you have to *bite* him? I'm listening. I want to understand."

Will smiles to himself. "No… you don't."

"I do," Jack assures him, ignoring the bizarre smile. "But I guess I already know why, don't I? You did it because of me. I know how hard I work you. I drove you too far. You lost your grip—only for a second you lost your way, and while you were lost, you attacked Hannibal.

You thought he was someone else, you weren't seeing things straight. But you're seeing them now, aren't you, Will?"

Slowly Will turns his head, pointing his masked face in Jack's direction. But he's staring right through Jack, eyes vacant and unblinking. "I see… everything, Jack. Everything."

"Good," says Jack, a little uncomfortably. "That's good. Look, I've talked to Alana and we agree you should take some time off consulting. You have your trial in a few days; it's important you concentrate on getting well for that. But just because our professional relationship is on hold, Will, it doesn't mean I'm gonna let any of this affect my testimony in court. I'll be sure to tell the world how cooperative you've been, that you have made major contributions to my cases to the point where I consider you indispensable to the work I do. The work *we* do. The FBI's still on your side. I won't let what happened today count against you. That's a promise."

Will says nothing. He's still staring a smoking hole through Jack.

"You're gonna be ok," Jack insists. "Just give it time; some peace and quiet,"—he throws a dubious glance at the (temporarily muted) television and the Cheshire grin of Dr. Gideon, who's listening to every word they say—"and you'll feel better."

Looking at Jack's strained face, so desperate for reassurance of any kind, Will feels a twinge of something bitter, something cruel. "Is it… going to scar?" he asks.

Jack looks at him, unnerved. "What was that?"

"Is it going to scar?" Will repeats, enunciating clearly through the mask. "With a face like that… a scar can only… improve things…don't you think?"

Jack pretends that Will has only inquired after Hannibal's health. "He needed a few stitches, but he's gonna be fine. No harm done."

"When… can I see him? I'd like… to see him."

Jack draws a slow breath. "Now you know that's not going to happen. How can I put the two of you together in a room after what you did? I'm afraid you're not coming within a hundred feet of Hannibal Lecter ever again."

Will takes this in. "You told him that yet?"

"Not yet. But when I do, I'm sure he'll agree it's for the best."

"Heh. When you tell him that… he's gonna be barely… restraining himself… from making chop suey…out of you."

Jack's eyes widen. This is a statement he cannot overlook. "Will," he says, "you're still confused."

"Oh, am I?" And now Will really looks at Jack. He looks at him and grins from ear to ear. "Am I, Jack? I don't… think so. I think you're the one… who's confused. About… pretty

much… everything."

Jack stares, shocked mute.

"Not your fault… " says Will, maliciously. "Not entirely your fault. Dr. Lecter's the one…to blame. He's made you… his stooge. Just one…of his many…*puppets*. He dragged you… through the mud…with his spree. And you let him. You let him. Makes me sad… to see you this way."

Slowly Jack stands up, so that he's now staring down at Will from up on high. "It makes *you* sad to see *me*? Have you seen yourself lately?"

"No," says Will, flatly. "I haven't seen myself…in a long time."

"Will, you've gotta snap out of this." A final plea in Jack's voice. "I know this place is bad. This place is death. But you have to rise above it. You have to try. These periods of confusion, these ideas you have about Dr. Lecter, you know they are delusions. I know you know they are *delusions*."

Will shakes his head, pitying Jack, despising Jack. "I'm not…delusional. Never been… delusional. What do I have to say…to make you understand? What do I…have to do…to make you believe me? I could confess…to some more murders…if you want. Is that what you want?"

And with vindictive relish he swings the pendulum, so that in an instant he is crying, fat tears coursing down his face, leaving nebulous trails across the plastic of his mask.

"I didn't mean to bite him, Jack… He's just my poor…innocent psychiatrist… Wouldn't hurt a fly…but I just get confused…I just get confused sometimes, that's all. Oh, Jack, please forgive me…Pleeeease."

And he stops the pendulum, a hard stop that abruptly clears the despairing expression from his face, the tears shutting off like a faucet.

"There," he says. "How was that? That good enough… for you?"

Jack stricken. Mortally hurt. He backs away from Will. He can't bear to be near this stranger, this masked and mocking thing. For a long time he says nothing, but his Adam's apple is bobbing again. Finally he whispers: "What is this?"

Will's voice leaps out of him, loud and strong. "This is *me*. This…is who I've always been." He tilts his head against the glass. "I'm done with masks, Jack. I'm through pretending. You wanted me…to stop lying. So I've stopped. The mirrors he planted with the corpses…the mirrors you were so interested in…those were just Dr. Lecter's little jokes. I said once in a session…that I was his mirror…that that's how he thinks of me…and after that, the mirror became his way…of saying hello to me. That's how I knew…the spree was the work of the Chesapeake Ripper. The work…of Hannibal Lecter."

Jack shakes his head. Denying it. Refusing to listen to it. He is so far gone that he cannot permit himself, even for a second, to contemplate the truth. And that's fine; Will expected as much. He isn't telling Jack the truth because he wants Jack's help. He no longer needs Jack's help. He's telling Jack the truth because he wants to push Jack away forever.

"The organs," says Will. "His 'surgical trophies'…he takes them home to his beautiful kitchen…and serves them up on those…immaculate porcelain dishes of his and then…he eats them. And he feeds them…to you. He's a cannibal, Jack. He's a cannibal…and now…so are you."

Lids pulled back, mouth open, Jack keeps backing away; a great distance now lies between them. "You're sick, Will," he says, voice thin. "You're sick."

"I was sick. I'm not any more."

"Then…" but Jack's voice breaks. He tries again. "Then what happened to you?"

And Will looks at him through the tops of his eyes and *smiles*. "He happened to me, Jack. *He* happened. And he's gonna keep happening until somebody stops him."

Jack covers his face with both hands for just a second. He is struggling with something, struggling and losing. Finally he turns his back on Will and begins walking away.

Will raises his voice. "Believe me…don't believe me…I don't care any more. Someday you'll see."

And Jack is gone. Cut loose. Not so hard—like ripping off a Band-Aid.

Will slowly drops his head back against the glass. One down. Two to go.

Alana is his next victim. Like Jack she comes accompanied by Dr. Chilton, who is bristling with self-importance only somewhat dented by Dr. Gideon's enthusiastic catcalls. Alana meanwhile completely ignores Gideon. She is cloaked in a steeliness that Will finds rather hard to look at. Which is funny, considering the difficult time Alana is having looking at him.

The fluorescents chase the blood from her face. She stares at Will for a long time, and though nothing changes in her expression, Will can feel her horror and her heartbreak radiating out of her in shivering shockwaves.

But stronger than the shock and hurt is her thunderous anger. She rounds on Chilton. "This isn't just absurd—it is shockingly, *shockingly* inhumane."

"Now just a minute—" begins Chilton.

"Don't even try! There is no excuse for this kind of treatment. No rationale you could possibly provide to make this acceptable. This is *torture*. Look at him,"—and she points at

Will, and with that pointing finger directed at him Will feels like a lowly object, like a *thing* —"he is calm, he isn't fighting. He doesn't need to be restrained!"

"Oh he does," says Chilton, losing his temper too. "He most certainly does need to be restrained. The only reason he appears calm right now is because we have been keeping him heavily sedated."

This is definitely the wrong thing to say to Alana. She looks incandescent with rage.

"You don't have permission to do that! You can't just change his medication regimen; he has to appear in court in three days!"

"That's not my problem."

"Not your problem!" Alana is shaking. "Not your problem?!"

But Chilton sticks to his guns. "My problem is that I have the FBI and all its eager little helpers tramping over my hospital, second-guessing my work, getting in the way of my ability to actually address my patient's illness. Don't try to deny it! You and Agent Crawford kept insisting I relax security around Will Graham—you made me grant him all sorts of privileges—you kept him up at all hours—refused to let me treat him the way I would have preferred—and the result is what you see before you. He is violent, hostile, uncooperative. Unpredictable. He's a compulsive liar. He is manipulative, and he is delusional. In short: psychopathic."

"Well, I strongly disagree with your diagnosis," Alana says, but she looks paler than ever. "And so does Dr. Lecter."

"Perhaps Dr. Lecter will change his tune now he has Will Graham's bite pattern embedded in his face," crows Chilton.

"He won't," says Alana, with a deadly calm that indicates she is restraining a great deal of emotion right now.

Meanwhile Chilton is barely concealing his smarmy smile. "I know you care about Will Graham. You and Dr. Lecter both have—ah—complicated relations with him. I'm aware of the—ah—material the FBI recovered from his cell."

Alana's voice like a whiplash. "*That isn't any of your business*."

Which makes Chilton back off. "Perhaps not, but Will Graham is my business. He is *my* patient. And it is my belief that your affection for *my* patient has clouded your judgment, Dr. Bloom."

Alana says nothing to this.

"He knows he has your trust and he exploits it. And you allow him to do it, because you cannot see him for what he really is. But I can. I think both you and Dr. Lecter ought to trust *my* judgment for a change. I am Will Graham's doctor. I am in charge of his treatment and,

from now on, what I say goes. And I say he stays in that straitjacket until he convinces me he isn't a danger to himself and others."

Alana turns away from Chilton. Her fists are clenched, bloodless. But suddenly she turns back to him, and as she speaks, she seems to grow in stature.

"I've been speaking to the DOJ," she says. "If Will is found not guilty by reason of insanity, they are going to transfer him to a secure institution in Virginia. You won't be his primary psychiatrist any more. You won't have any further input on his treatment, and I will make sure that you won't be able to publish a word about him in any reputable journal. If you try to publish, if you try to protest the transfer in any way, I will make sure the entire psychiatric community hears about Will's experience with Lorazepam last week."

Chilton looks slapped. "You don't—that isn't—hrrm!" And he storms off, muttering to himself.

Alana stands there for a moment, breathing heavily, trying to get herself under control.

Dr. Gideon watches her, a lovesick expression on his face. "Oh, Dr. Bloom. Brave bold Dr. Bloom. What a vision you are. I wish I had you in *my* corner. Then maybe I'd get a shot at biting my psychiatrist. Wouldn't you agree he needs one?"

"I'm glad to see you've recovered from your gunshot wound," Alana says to him, eminently polite.

Then she turns her back on Dr. Gideon and slowly lowers herself on to her knees in front of Will's window. He notices, as she does this, that there are bloodstains on the forearms and elbows of her blouse. She helped Hannibal staunch the bleeding. She held his hand in the hospital. She has been so concerned with Hannibal—and with Will—that she hasn't even had a chance to change her soiled clothes.

Alana peers into the chamber. She has to peer a long way: Will is sitting with his back against the far wall, and he makes no move to come nearer to her. When she looks at him, she doesn't see the mask or the straitjacket—she sees *him*, Will Graham, sallow and sickly; tormented and demonized; so very, very pitiable. If she saw him as a monster, he could take it. In that perception he might find some strength. But oh, he does not want her pity. He chokes on her pity. He overdosed on pity long ago and now he cannot tolerate the smallest drop.

He says: "You already found…a new hospital for me?"

She nods. "If you're found not guilty; yes."

"Counting your chickens," he says, "isn't it? Or maybe it isn't. I guess…insanity…is looking pretty good right now. Pretty defensible. Karim must be pleased."

Alana issues a low sigh. "Actually she threatened to quit. We prepared your defense based on your cooperation with the FBI and your record of good behavior at this hospital. Now both are out the window. Nigella thinks you're deliberately self-sabotaging."

“Why would I do that?”

Alana responds to him in a carefully modulated, businesslike voice. “It’s not uncommon for people in your situation, on the eve of a trial, to experience acute feelings of guilt or grief, both of which can escalate into self-destructive behavior. They are afraid of being found guilty of their crimes, of course, but more than that, they are afraid of being found *innocent*.”

“That isn’t a concern…for me, though,” Will says. “Innocent isn’t even on the table…for me. I get the lovely choice between…insanity and guilty.”

Alana cringes a little. “I know. What I’m trying to say, Will, is…I’m beginning to suspect that when it comes right down to it, you don’t want to be saved.”

He takes this in. “I’m not self-sabotaging, Alana. I’m just…tired. Tired of struggling. Tired of playing nice. I don’t have the…patience for it any more.”

“You tried to kill Hannibal,” she says, firmly, as if he has yet to realize this fact. “All this time I knew you hadn’t stopped suspecting him of murder. But whatever your suspicions, whatever crimes you may believe Hannibal committed, that’s no reason to assault him. To—to bite him. These are not the actions of a rational person. You must see that.”

Will, with difficulty, shrugs.

Alana’s eyebrows draw together. “You’re not even going to try to defend yourself?”

“I’m not sorry…for doing what I did. Just let it go, Alana. Let it go.”

“I can’t do that. You know I can’t.” And Alana looks down, her hands curling in her lap. The set of her shoulders is rigid, but her fingers are shaking. For a long time she says nothing. Will knows that whatever’s coming next he’s probably not going to like it.

When Alana finally speaks, that note of deathly calm has returned to her voice. “I have to ask you something. And I want you to be honest with me. Are you capable of being honest with me?”

“Probably not,” he says, honestly. And at the stricken expression on her face, “I’ll give it…my best shot, ok?”

She nods, understanding this answer is the best she can hope for.

“When they moved you,” she says, “the FBI sent some people into your old cell. Their instructions were to confiscate all of the sensitive information Jack had given you access to. But while they were clearing everything out, they found something underneath your mattress. A drawing.”

Suddenly Will is grateful for the mask. He has something to hide his face behind.

“You know what drawing I’m referring to.” Alana’s voice is firm, businesslike. Every syllable slaps him.

“Yes,” he says, unable to look at her. “I know the drawing.”

She collects herself, draws the cloak of professionalism tighter around her shoulders. “I’d like you to tell me where you got it from.”

Will stays silent for a very long time. Eventually he says, “You should talk to Dr. Lecter… about this.”

She sighs. “I already have.”

“And what did he say?”

“That he was carrying it with him in his briefcase, which he left unattended for a few minutes during a visit with you, and during that time you must have taken his bag, looked through it, and stolen the drawing without him noticing.”

Will turns this over in his mind. Not Hannibal’s best lie by far. Maybe blood loss has made him sloppy.

“Is that what happened?” Alana asks him, and he hears the subtle note of desperation in her voice.

“Yeah,” he says. “In a nutshell.”

Alana stares at him. “This is you being honest?”

He nods, pained.

“Why would you steal it? Why would you do that?”

“Do you really need me…to answer that question?”

“Yes,” she says, gesturing explosively. “Obviously, yes. I do. *Why did you take it*?”

And he steels himself. This one’s gonna hurt.

“I stole the drawing, Alana…because I wanted to keep it. I wanted to…look at it. I stole the drawing because…I didn’t want Dr. Lecter to have it. I stole the drawing …because I’m in love with you, Alana, and I want to…be close to you any way I can. I… resent Dr. Lecter for having what I can… never have. I hate him for being with you. So yes…I stole the drawing. Happy now?”

By the time he has finished this, there are tears in his eyes. The tears are honest, the words less so.

For a moment Alana says nothing. She crosses her arms in front of her and squeezes hard.

“What do you expect me to say to that?” she asks hoarsely.

“I don’t have any…expectations whatsoever. I’m just telling…you the truth. Like you asked me to.”

She is shaking. “I’m sorry,” she whispers.

His only response is a choking sound.

“I’m sorry,” Alana continues, “because *I don’t believe you*. I don’t believe a word of what you’re saying. I don’t believe you’d steal that drawing from Hannibal. I think you have more respect for me than that.”

“Well,” Will shrugs again, “I don’t.”

Her eyes are bright with fury and her jaw is clenched. “I know you’re lying.”

“If I’m lying, then so is Dr. Lecter.”

“Yes,” she says. “I’m aware of that.”

And Will knows they are heading into dangerous territory. “Why would Dr. Lecter lie to you about this?”

“I don’t know.” Her voice rises with frustration. “I just don’t know. I was hoping you could explain it to me, but apparently that was wishful thinking.”

“If he’s lying to you,” Will says, carefully, “he’s doing it for the same reasons I am.”

“What reasons?” Alana asks, at her wits’ end.

“He cares about you.” Will speaks calmly even though the words are goring him. “He cares about you…very deeply…and very desperately. He is lying to you because…he wants to protect you. Do you want…my advice, Alana?”

“I—” she says. It’s all she can say. She shrugs helplessly.

“You should let him protect you. Let him love you. That’s what I think you should do.” Will’s voice is gone by the end of this.

Alana is staring at him, overwhelmed. “I don’t—I never—Will, I don’t *need* protecting.”

“Yes you do,” says Will, snorting back tears. “Sorry, but you really do. You think…so much, Alana. You deliberate on the…morality…the logic…the efficacy of every action…every choice, but despite…despite all that thinking you do…you still have terrible judgment. The worst judgment…of anyone I know. You’re drawn to him…and you’re drawn to me…and you know what, Alana? That’s about…as terrible a choice…as the one I’m getting in court on Tuesday.”

Alana brings up a hand to her lips, catches her sob between her fingers. “Will…”

He plows forward. “When my trial’s over…whatever happens there…I don’t want to see you any more. It…confuses me too much. It confuses you. Let’s agree…to go our separate… ways, ok?”

Her mouth works, but no sound comes out. Finally she says, “I don’t want to do that, Will. You—you need me.”

Will speaks in a dead voice. “You were right, Alana. I don’t want to be saved. At least…not by you.”

Her lips are trembling. “Is that really what you want?”

He nods, blinking very hard.

“Ok…” she says. She fidgets with the material of her blouse and seems only now to realize the bloodstains are there. She stretches her arms out in front of her and stares at them in shock. Then she looks back up at him.

“I—I respect your decision, then. I think I’d better—go. I’m—gonna make some calls, find someone with the—uh—the authority to make Dr. Chilton release you from”—she swallows hard—“those restraints.”

"Thanks,” says Will, on automatic. “Good luck with that.”

“Bye,” croaks Alana, and she walks back up the corridor on shaking legs. Will expects Gideon to start in again on her, but Gideon watches her go in silence, hands politely folded in his lap.

“Wow,” he says, when Alana has gone. “Can’t believe you’re throwing that away.”

Will says nothing. He shuts his eyes tightly and lets the sedative carry him off for a while. Two down.

The third is more of an unknown. There are obstacles preventing this particular person from visiting Will. Plenty of obstacles, not the least of which is Chilton on a power trip, cutting Will’s visitor list to the bare minimum. But Will is certain this third visitor will come. His third visitor would walk through walls and rush through fire for the chance of seeing him.

When the final visitor arrives, Lawrence Wells happens to be in the middle of one of his fits —his screams echo off the walls. Gideon and Stammets are alternately egging Wells on and yelling at him to shut up. But when they see Will’s visitor, it is as if a mantle of silence settles over the entire cellblock. Lawrence Wells stops screaming. Eldon Stammets crosses himself. Gideon stands at the glass, frozen. He then offers the visitor a little salute, which the visitor acknowledges with a nod.

Will hears the silence and knows the time has come. But he remains where he is, sitting cross-legged in the center of his cell with his back to the glass.

The visitor's footsteps halt in front of Will's cell. The visitor looks in at Will. Says nothing.

"Who'd you have to kill…to get access to me?" Will asks, casually.

Hannibal doesn't answer.

"If Jack knew…" Will continues. "He doesn't want you within…a hundred feet of me."

"What Jack doesn't know won't hurt him," says Hannibal.

"Now," says Will, with a bone-dry laugh. "You…of all people…know that isn't true."

He can feel the sharpness of Hannibal's stare like a blade dragging across the back of his straitjacket.

"Will…" he whispers, a strange tentativeness in his voice. "Won't you show me your face?"

Will doesn't answer him, doesn't turn around. When Jack saw him in this mask, he was afraid. When Alana saw it, she pitied him. When Hannibal sees the mask he will do neither of those things, and Will isn't sure he is ready for that.

"Let me look at you," says Hannibal.

Will does not relent.

Hannibal lets out a sigh. "*Quid pro quo*, then," he says. "If you show me your face, I will show you mine."

They both know it's an offer Will can't refuse. With dreadful slowness he turns around to face Hannibal.

Hannibal's eyes are larger than normal, almost gentle. Will feels his stare like a caress.

"Hello, Will," he says quietly, speaking the words as if he has never greeted Will before.

"Hello, Dr. Lecter. Your turn."

On Hannibal's cheek a neat clean bandage, which he wears with the same insouciance as his paisley necktie. Without breaking eye contact, he reaches up, peels back the tape, and removes the gauze from his face.

Will overcomes the sedative enough to stagger to his feet. He approaches the glass and kneels down before it, deliberately mirroring Hannibal's worshipful stance. Hannibal, without being asked, tilts his face to give Will a better view of the livid bite mark on his cheek. The skin is swollen from right under Hannibal's eye to the corner of his mouth; the shallower abrasions are scabbed and purpling, but in two places near Hannibal's cheekbone Will tore off enough flesh to require suturing.

Will looks at the bite for a long time, admiring his work. Hannibal, out of the sides of his eyes, watches Will admire it.

“It will scar,” says Will.

Hannibal nods. “Something to remember you by,” he says. “I enjoy scars. They have the strange power to remind us that our past is real.”

“Cormac McCarthy,” says Will.

Hannibal acknowledges his plagiarism with a shrug. “I am by no means original.”

“But you come pretty close.”

Will settles back on his haunches with a sigh as Hannibal re-tapes the bandage, completely accurate placement without the aid of a mirror.

“I have spoken to Alana,” Hannibal says. “And to Jack. Shedding allies, Will?”

Will’s turn to shrug. “Neither of them was the…best of allies. You made sure of that.”

Hannibal smiles the scalpel smile. But it is gone an instant later.

“Will,” he whispers, “you cannot be alone.”

“I was always alone. This just cements that fact.”

Hannibal shakes his head. “I never wanted you to be alone.”

“*You* don’t want to be alone,” Will corrects him. “Maybe I feel differently, have you ever considered that?”

“You could talk to Jack,” says Hannibal.

“Hah.”

“You haven’t burned your bridges as completely as you believe. Tell him you need to keep seeing me. Assure him of your progress in our sessions. I believe you can convince him to reverse his decision.”

“Jack’s not big on changing his mind,” says Will.

Hannibal refuses to back down. “Your word still counts with him. I am confident in your ability to convince him. I encourage you to try. You can be very persuasive when you have a mind to be.”

Will stares at Hannibal: Hannibal on his knees like a penitent, earnestly dishing out compliments. What a sight.

“And why should I do that?” Will asks him. “Why should I bother?”

Hannibal gives him a look. "You know why."

Will merely raises his eyebrows. He waits for Hannibal to say it.

Hannibal nods his head, understanding what Will requires of him. “You want to keep seeing me,” he says. “Just as I desire to keep seeing you.”

Slowly Will smiles. “Are you begging me, Dr. Lecter?”

“Would you like me to beg?”

Will thinks about it seriously. “No,” he says. “It doesn’t make a difference to me what you do. I’m not talking to Jack.”

Hannibal’s brows knit. “Will…” he says, in a guttural voice. “You need to see me.”

“No, Doctor,” Will says, his voice iron. “I don’t.”

“There’s more work I can do for you; I know I can still be of help to you.”

“I don’t want your help.”

“Perhaps not, but you need it.” Cold fury now in Hannibal’s voice. “You cannot survive in this place if you stop seeing me.”

“You put me here,” Will reminds him, because he suspects Hannibal might have honestly forgotten. “I think I’ll muddle through somehow.”

“Will...you have to see me.” Hannibal is staring, nostrils flared, tight fingers splayed on his knees. A coiled spring.

“You really don’t get it,” Will whispers, in awe. “Allow me to explain.” And he leans forward, his masked face almost touching the glass.

“Dr. Lecter…I don’t have to see you…to *see* you.”

Hannibal’s hand, of its own accord, flies up to the glass. Trembling fingers pressed against it. The closest he can get to touching Will. He has lost the ability to speak.

“I don’t need you any more,” Will says. “Don’t get me wrong. It’s been fun…while it lasted. We’ve had some good times…haven’t we? But we’re done now. Now…you’re fired.”

And Will glances dismissively at the hand against the glass. Hannibal becomes aware of what he’s doing and drops his hand instantly. He pulls in a rumbling breath. He still can’t speak. Will has stolen all his words.

“Your services are no longer required,” Will continues. “Surely…you have other patients. Losing one…can’t make much difference to you. Thank you for your help. Your…friendship. You’ve done what you could for me. No one…can say otherwise. So now…you go.”

Against his knees Hannibal’s hands have tightened into claws.

“Go,” Will orders him. “Don’t come back.”

And it's as if a cord has been cut inside Hannibal—his shoulders slump, he releases his breath. The coiled spring relaxes.

"Very well," he whispers. He eyes go opaque, his gaze turned inward. "Very well," he says again, as if, like the televised preacher, he is now stuck on a loop.

Will's voice is controlled, and savage. "Goodbye, Hannibal."

And Hannibal shivers. He registers that Will has called him by his first name, and this is what finally releases him from whatever spell he was under. He inclines his head, robotically.

"Goodbye, Will," he says.

He stands up, re-buttons his suit jacket, and whispers: "Until we meet again."

Will watches him leave. This goodbye has been both the easiest and the hardest for him. He cannot help but worry that in untethering himself from Hannibal, he has released a wild beast upon an unsuspecting world.

Dr. Gideon has been watching this dialogue with uncharacteristic silence. Now he looks over at Will and says, "Breaking up is hard to do. How many more you got in you?"

"That was the last," says Will, heavily.

"Some people in here would kill for visitors. Meanwhile you're sending all of yours away." Gideon shakes his head. "But it's a good thing you ditched the Transylvanian. That was long in the coming, I bet."

"It was." A hollow feeling is slowly expanding inside Will. He knows he'd better get used to it. He looks at Gideon and says, "You realize…he's the Chesapeake Ripper… don't you?"

He's expecting a big reaction from the other man, but all he gets is a shrug.

"Well," says Dr. Gideon quietly, "aren't we all?"

Chapter 23

Chapter Summary

Stay with me.

Chapter Notes

I apologize in advance.

Nighttime in the subbasement. The overhead lights go out, which at first seems like a blessing, but in their place a graveyard darkness descends over the cellblock. The television is off. Lawrence Wells has stopped screaming. Eldon Stammets has stopped singing. They are probably asleep. Gideon, though, is awake. Will can see his silhouette, upright and watchful near the glass. Staring out at nothing.

You'd think the sedative sitting heavy in Will's veins would make sleeping easier, but he can't manage it, not when surrounded by these murderers whose minds he knows so well. Instead he lies curled up on the floor in a state of twilit consciousness, persisting at the intersection between the real and the unreal.

Sounds in the corridor. Will's cell door opening. He hears the soft paddings of an animal on the quilted floor and knows the stag has returned. The creature approaches him, seeking the veneration it considers its due. But Will has no reaction to its presence; he keeps his eyes closed, his breathing even. He is not afraid of the stag any more, and why should he be?

The stag is right above him now. It sticks its curious nose into his face, its warm breath fogging the plastic of the mask. A steady panting, as reassuring as a loved one's heartbeat. Slow joy dawns on Will. He opens his eyes. Not the stag at all.

"Hey…" he says, just mouthing the words because he doesn't want Gideon to hear. "What are you doing here, huh? How did you find me?"

Winston's emotive eyes like two pinpricks of light in the darkness. He licks the exposed parts of Will's face with careful attention. Circles him excitedly, wanting to play.

“I can’t,” Will says. “Sorry, Winston.”

The dog whines just once, very softly. When he realizes Will can’t even pat him, Winston settles down on the floor next to him, his soft fur tickling Will’s face, his living warmth seeping through the heavy fabric of the straitjacket. Winston rests his head between his two front paws, daintily, restlessly. He isn’t going to sleep. He is keeping watch.

“Good boy,” Will mouths into his shaggy hide. He curls up closer against him, shuts his eyes, and through the holes in the mask he breathes in the dog’s familiar smell. “Oh you good boy. That’s right. Stay with me. Stay with me.”

Winston is steady and still; he isn’t going anywhere, but Will keeps repeating the word: “Stay… stay… stay… ”

“Mr. Graham?”

No. Will does not want this dream to end. Stay… stay… stay…

“*Mr. Graham*?”

Will recognizes the voice. He opens his eyes and looks up from the floor.

The lights on the cellblock are still off. The other inmates are asleep, even Gideon.

“This isn’t your ward,” Will says, groggily.

“It is today,” Barney whispers. “I made a trade.”

His gentle dark eyes are as unassuming as always. The mask and straitjacket have not altered the way Barney looks at Will; he is too well acquainted with these instruments of restraint to be much affected by them.

“Can you wake up for me, Mr. Graham?”

“Not asleep.” Will drags himself into a sitting position. “Just dreaming.”

Barney’s brow slowly folds up. “You don’t belong here,” he says, more to himself than to Will.

Will assumes Barney has come to apologize for tackling and tranking him the other day, which is very considerate of him but wholly unnecessary. “It’s ok. You were just doing your job.”

“Yeah,” sighs Barney. “Guess so.”

Will’s smile is slightly twisted. “I’m thinking that may have been…a straight bourbon day for you, huh, Barney?”

“Sure was,” says Barney. And then again, “You don’t belong here, that’s all.”

Will looks away. “I don’t really belong anywhere.”

Barney stares at him for a long time, building up his courage for a push. “I brought you a visitor,” he says, finally. “But she was never here; you got me?”

Will looks back at Barney and nods.

Barney motions to his left. Soft footsteps on the linoleum. Beverly appears, her collar pulled up to her chin in an effort to appear more covert.

“Ten minutes,” Barney tells her.

Beverly smiles tightly. “You’re a lifesaver.”

“Mmhmm,” says Barney, who never seems interested in gratitude. He gives Will a businesslike nod and lopes off.

Beverly peers through the gloom. When she sees Will, her eyebrows draw together and her shoulders tighten, but she makes no mention of the mask or the straitjacket.

“Sorry for the early wakeup call,” she says, “but it was the only way I could get in to see you.”

Will can’t do chitchat right now. “Did you get the key?”

“What key?” She smirks at his annoyed look. Her uninjured hand comes out of her pocket and she presses a stout silver key against the glass of his cell.

“Ta da.” She grins at him expectantly.

Will shuffles closer. Hannibal’s key. Hannibal’s undoing. He assures himself of its physical reality, its weight and shape in Beverly’s hand, and then he looks at her again.

“Then what are you doing here? You should have…been in West York *yesterday.*”

Which makes her expectant expression waver. “Wow. All this gratefulness; I’m blushing.”

“We don’t have time,” he tells her, flatly.

“I wanted to see you first.” She shrugs. “So sue me.”

“There’s nothing more I can tell you. You just have to…trust me. Trust me and go.”

She shakes her head. “See, you’re always saying that. ‘Trust me, Bev, trust me.’ And every time you say it, you immediately follow it up by doing something *insane* like using someone’s face as a chew toy.” She cocks her head, looks at him hard. “Was that what you were planning to do? When you told me you were gonna ‘distract’ Lecter?”

“No. It just kind of…happened.”

She doesn't look convinced. "Will, I've thrown my hat in with you here. I'm putting a lot on the line for you. So you've gotta start being straight with me. Because I can't take any more of these nasty surprises." She shrugs helplessly. "I just can't."

Will stares at her. He understands now why she didn't go to West York yesterday when she had the chance. How could Beverly follow his instructions when the last thing she saw him do was bite Hannibal Lecter in the face? Now she doubts him: the thinnest sliver of doubt, but doubt nonetheless. Throughout their partnership Beverly has fought to understand Will, to come to terms with this confounding situation into which he has thrown her, but the second she begins to feel comfortable, he turns into a stranger again. And she can't risk her job—her life—for a stranger. She has come to see him because she wants to remind herself why she trusts him, why she believes him. Because at this moment she is truly in danger of forgetting.

So he tries, as hard as he can, to soften his sharp angles and become her friend again. This act of persuasion is rather complicated by the fact that he is wearing a plastic gimp mask. He has to reassure her with only his eyes and his slow slurry voice.

"I'm sorry, Bev. Really sorry. I didn't mean…to freak you out. The situation just kind of… escalated. But you can't argue with what works. You got…the key, didn't you? And this time I promise you: I am not holding… anything back. If you get any nasty surprises…in West York, they won't be from me, ok? *Ok*?"

"Everyone thinks you experienced some kind of breakdown," she says.

And Will understands by this that Beverly is worried he might have suffered one too.

"Jack's washing his hands of you," she continues. "You don't have access to the Ripper investigation any more. It's gonna be hard for me to keep seeing you without it looking strange to people. How are we going to keep doing this, Will? How are you going to help me catch him? I mean, if I don't find anything in West York?"

"You will find something in West York," says Will, firmly.

"If I don't, you'll be up shit creek without a paddle."

"You will find something, Beverly. I know you will. Look…if you don't feel comfortable trusting me…then at least trust yourself. Trust your instincts. You've got some…amazing instincts, sharp as anything. What are they…telling you to do?"

Beverly hesitates, thinking it over, but before she has a chance to answer, a quiet voice says: "*Beverly*?"

She freezes on the spot.

The voice is Alana's. She is standing near Gideon's darkened cell, her face in the shadows.

"Beverly, what are you doing here?" The question is friendly, curious, but there is the faintest edge to it.

Beverly flashes Will the quickest expression of alarm and palms the storage unit key. Her hand takes nervous shelter in her pocket. But when she speaks her voice is easy, casual. “I just wanted to see Will. You know, after what happened. Make sure he was ok.”

Alana steps forward, the emergency lights casting a soft glow on her inquisitive face. “At five in the morning?” she asks, a note of reproof in her voice.

“Jack won’t let me visit, so I had to improvise. Come on, Alana, I’m not hurting anybody. I just wanted to say hello.”

Alana nods slowly, but Will can see the wheels of her intelligence spinning and spinning. “That seems like a lot of work, just to say hello. Sneaking into the hospital after hours, avoiding the orderlies. That’s not improvisation, Beverly. That’s premeditation.”

“Premeditation?” A disbelieving smile on Beverly’s face. But before she can say anything further, a new voice speaks.

“Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear…”

Dr. Gideon is not asleep after all. Though he is lying on his bed, his eyes are open: his expression is avid, leering. “Rule number one of romantic intrigue, Mr. Graham: never let the old girlfriend meet the new. That’s when the claws really come out.”

They ignore him with difficulty.

“*Why* are you so desperate to see him?” Alana asks, eyebrows drawing together.

“I—” says Beverly, and Will knows she is tempted to tell Alana something truthful.

“Don’t,” he whispers, and she cuts herself off.

Something changes in Alana’s face—shutters closing.

Will clears his throat. “Beverly is my friend. I wanted to…see her. How is that a problem, Alana?”

“I’m not saying it’s a problem,” Alana answers him, coolly.

And Will knows he has made a mistake. Alana is thinking about their previous encounter, when Will told her he didn’t want to see her any more. He can see the hurt, and the steely façade erected to mask that hurt, so very clearly on her face.

“It wouldn’t be a problem,” Alana repeats, “if this meeting really were a social call. But that’s not what this is, is it?” And before either of them can provide her with another explanation, another lie, she looks at Beverly with very bright eyes and says:

“You’re helping him, aren’t you? With his ‘investigation?’”

The way Alana pronounces this word with derisive air quotes is unspeakably painful to Will.

Beverly goes pale.

“Don’t. Tell. Her. Anything,” Will hisses.

Alana hears him say it. “I knew it,” she says, voice trembling. Trembling with *rage*. “I knew. The night of the spree. You were helping him. But I thought: Beverly wouldn’t do that. She’s too smart to be drawn into something like that. Too good of an agent. But here you are, betraying everything you’re supposed to stand for.”

Beverly’s mouth drops open. Will can feel righteous anger building within her, begging for release. But she obeys Will, says nothing in her own defense.

Alana advances on Beverly. “You may think you’re being a good friend to him, but in reality you are doing his psyche an unspeakable amount of damage. If you keep encouraging his delusions, he will never break free of them.”

This is too much for Beverly to take.

“*They’re not delusions*!” she says.

Will cringes. Oh, this is bad. This is very, very bad.

A glint of something wounded, something panicked, in Alana’s eyes. But an instant later it is gone, and she is shaking her head, disappointed. “What has he been making you do?”

She sounds sympathetic to Beverly’s plight, almost pitying, which just serves to make Beverly even angrier. A minute ago, her faith in Will was slipping. But now—in the face of a challenge—Beverly is more stalwart than ever.

“He doesn’t make me do anything!” she says. “I’m helping him because I believe him. I believe his story.”

“You believe he was framed for the murders?” Alana asks, quietly.

“Yes I do!”

“You believe Hannibal Lecter framed him for the murders?”

Now Beverly looks at Will—who is staring at her desperately—and an apology passes between them. “Yes I do,” Beverly repeats, softer this time.

“Oh ho ho,” says Dr. Gideon, but his voice is low, almost serious. “The *crazy* appears to be *contagious!*”

Alana seems to feel the same way. She is looking at Beverly as if despairing of her sanity—funny, because Beverly is looking at Alana in much the same way.

“You are a scientist,” Alana says. “You deal in hard evidence. In proof. Are you telling me you have proof Hannibal did these things?”

Beverly and Will share another look. *Say nothing*, he wills her with his eyes.

"No," says Beverly, carefully. "I don't have proof."

"But she has a key," says Gideon. "A key to the Transylvanian's secret lair. She's gonna go snooping for proof just like Jonathan Harker. What? Don't tell me you don't know *Dracula*!"

Oh, fuck. Will stares a bullet into Gideon, who raises his arms, his *mea culpa* stance. "Oh, I'm sorry," he says maliciously, "was that supposed to be a secret?"

"What does he mean?" Alana's voice has gone hoarse. "What key? How did you get it?"

Beverly and Will both aghast, both unable to speak.

Alana brings up a hand to shadow her eyes. "Beverly, I—I don't understand. It's one thing if Will does something like this. His thinking has been compromised. But you? You could lose your job. You could go to *prison*." And Alana makes a decision. She puts out her hand, palm up. "Give it to me. Give me the key, and we'll forget this ever happened."

Beverly says nothing, but her hand tightens around the key in her pocket.

"Please," Alana says. "I'm asking you to give it to me." And then, with a note of desperation: "I am *trying* to make this right."

"Oh, is that what this is?" says Beverly, archly. "Seems to me what you're doing is protecting your serial killer boyfriend."

"Beverly," Will moans.

Alana makes a scandalized choking sound. Her eyes are glittering dangerously.

"Hannibal is not a serial killer," she says. "He is not a serial killer. You are never going to find proof that he is a serial killer, because he isn't one."

"Methinks the lady doth protest too much," says Dr. Gideon, very sly.

Alana won't hear it. Her lower lip is trembling, but her voice is strong. "Will has been spinning this story for months and months and now it has taken on enough detail and dimension to feel more real to him than reality itself. And I know…I *know* how convincing he can be. I know how easy it is to let yourself believe in him. To convince yourself that there's a possibility, however small, that what he says is true. Because you care about him and you want him to be well."

And Will can actually *hear* Hannibal underneath these words, a sinister echo. He has spoken these words to Alana so often, so compellingly, that she has internalized them.

She continues: "But Beverly, you can't do this any more. You can't listen to him. You have to stop allowing him to manipulate you."

And Beverly brays a laugh. "Oh my God, Alana, I am not the one being manipulated here!"

“Beverly, *shut up*,” says Will.

But Beverly is off, her voice high, sounding almost unhinged. “Ok, wait a minute. Just wait a minute. It’s one thing if you don’t accept the truth because the truth’s hidden from you. But it’s a whole other kind of head-in-the-sand syndrome when the truth is staring at you *in the face* and you still reject it! He has you wrapped around his finger, Alana. You’re living in his world now. You take this key from me and you aren’t ‘making things right.’ What you’re doing is aiding and abetting a serial killer.”

“I could say the same thing about you,” says Alana.

And Will flinches as if slapped.

Alana flinches too. She is shaking visibly, but her voice is steel. She holds out her hand again. “If you give me the key right now, I won’t tell Jack what you did. You can keep your job, as long as you stay away from Will.”

Beverly stares at her in horror.

“Please give it to me,” says Alana.

“Give it to her,” says Will, hollowly.

Beverly rears around at him. “*What*?”

“Just give it to her, Bev.”

“But—Will—”

He shakes his head. “There’s nothing else you can do.”

Even Alana is looking at him a little questioningly.

Meanwhile Beverly’s eyes are filling up with tears. “What the *fuck*?” She looks around helplessly—from Will to Alana to Dr. Gideon, who is grinning his hyena’s grin. “Fine!” she shoots out. “Fine! Take it, then! Give it back to him! What do I care!”

And she slaps the little key into Alana’s hand.

“Thank you,” says Alana, who with difficulty is hanging on to her composure. “It’s for the best, you’ll see.” She puts the key inside her purse. “When I come back, you’d better not be here. Am I being clear?”

“Crystal,” growls Beverly.

Alana cringes at the animosity. She gives Will the briefest look. A pleading look: *don’t hate me, I’d hate for you to hate me*. He just blinks back at her, impassive. Alana has picked her truth, chosen her side, and now there is no going back.

Alana can't bear to maintain eye contact. She leaves the hall, the solemn clack of her high heels fading as she goes, taking the key—and all their hopes—with her.

Beverly watches Alana leave, calculating the best angle at which to take her down. She flexes her fists several times until the violent impulse is back in the bottle.

"Well," she says to Dr. Gideon, "I hope you're happy."

"Very," he says, folding his arms behind his head. "Maybe that'll teach you a lesson about having private chats in public places. Never know who's listening!"

Beverly can't respond; she is too angry.

Will looks at her tensed profile, and feels at once a rush of tenderness and a deluge of shame. Beverly went to bat for him, and all for nothing.

"I'm sorry," he says. "I told you, you can't try… to convince her. We're past the point where it'll… do anyone any good."

"Yeah, yeah," mutters Beverly. "You're protecting her, I get it."

It doesn't exactly sound like she does, but Will lets it go.

"It was our one good chance of catching him," she continues, thickly. "Maybe our only chance."

"I know."

"Look what you had to do to get us that key. Look where you ended up."

Will nods.

"And you just gave it up for her!"

"I'm sorry," he says, again.

Beverly throws a despairing look up at the mold-darkened ceiling. "When he finds out what I was going to do, he's going to make sure there's nothing left in that storage unit. The thing's gonna be totally empty."

Will can say nothing to this.

Beverly shakes her head, dislodging a tear on to her cheek. But then, quite suddenly, she drops down to the floor near the glass of his cage, and begins whispering to him, almost inaudibly but with palpable urgency.

"The thing is—*I have a copy*."

"What?"

“I have another copy of the key. I made it yesterday. Just in case I dropped the original down a storm drain or something. It’s in my car.”

Will knows what she wants to do. “Beverly, no. You can’t.”

The gleam in her eyes only brightens. “I have to try.”

“But Alana might be calling him right now. He could already know.”

Beverly is too transported to care. “It’s our one chance, Will. We go all in.”

“He’ll be right behind you. *Right behind you*.”

“As long as I get there first.” Beverly’s hands turn into fists. “I still have my protective detail. I’ll bring them with me. Instant back-up.”

Will doesn’t know how to express his feelings. His rational self despairs at the thought of Beverly taking this obvious risk. But his desperate hindbrain needs her to do it, is simply overjoyed that there remains this one terrible avenue for them to travel down together.

“It’s now,” says Beverly, “or it’s never.”

Desperate hindbrain wins every time.

“Then what are you waiting for?” Will says. “Start running, Bev, and don’t stop for anything.”

She doesn’t say goodbye. She just jumps upright and runs.

Dr. Gideon shouts after her: “I hope you’re bringing holy water! And a stake! And some garlic!”

“FUCK OFF!” roars Lawrence Wells, woken by the noise.

“Yes, please fuck off,” says Will to Gideon, who smirks.

“Oh, get over it. You shot me in the chest—I’m allowed a little fun at your expense, don’t ya think?”

Will doesn’t answer. The massive projector that is his imagination is powering on, warming up.

Gideon is watching him. His smirk is reduced to a sideways smile, faint and unimpressed.

“So…that’s your little extracurricular activity, huh? You’re a regular Harry Houdini.” He flourishes his fingers. “An escape artist! You think you can wriggle out of that straitjacket, tear the Halloween mask off your face and hightail it out of this hellhole, leave the rest of us poor lunatics behind?” He crosses his arms and leans right up against the glass. “Well, it behooves me to inform you of some hard truths, Mr. Houdini. Escape is a lovely dream. A lovely, lovely dream. We’ve all dreamed it, once upon a time. I got pretty close to living it,

closer than anyone, but look what happened to me. I ended up right back where I started—thanks to you."

His eyes are now demonically bright, his voice loud and full of wrath.

"Chase your phantoms, catch your killers, make a public declaration that you're an innocent man! It won't matter. You won't ever leave this place. Nobody gets to leave this place. Nobody. Once you're here, you're here *forever*."

The words introduce a chill to Will's skin, but he chooses to ignore Gideon for now. He stalks to the back wall of his cell and sits down facing it. He needs quiet. He needs to think. But before he can lose himself in his projections of what's in store for Beverly, the fluorescents come back on, lighting up the cellblock in sickly green. A moment later the door of Will's cell opens. He turns around and sees a full cadre of orderlies entering the chamber. Barney is among them, but on this ward he is not the head orderly. That title is held by one of the blank-faced giants. The giant says to Will:

"The order just came down to take you out of those restraints. We're gonna need you to stay calm and not to move. If you move, you get a shot, and we're gonna keep you bundled up until you learn how to behave. You understand? Nod if you understand."

Will nods. The orderlies descend upon him, hovering close as they undertake the laborious process of unbuckling, unsnapping and unstrapping him. They manipulate his head and shoulders and arms as if he were a living doll. Will endures it, but then he turns his head, and through the screen of their bodies he sees Alana standing beyond the glass. Her face looks pale and ghostly, eerily without expression. She is supervising the orderlies, making sure they do as she asked. So she convinced Chilton to unmask him, just as she promised Will she would. That was her reason for coming to the hospital at this early hour; that is why she discovered Beverly.

Alana catches Will looking and they make eye contact just as the orderlies remove the mask from his face. Knowledge passes between them like a breath of chilling air and, just like that, they both know the tie between them has been severed forever. Will can feels its passing: whatever it was they had—or could have had—together, it is gone now. Lost in the painful past.

Alana assures herself that he will be free, or if not quite free than at least he will be comfortable. Then she turns her back on him. She walks up the corridor and disappears into the wide outer world from which Will is now an exile.

He hardly notices when the orderlies have finished with him. What finally rouses his attention is Barney, who stays behind when the others leave the chamber.

"Better?" he asks.

Will flexes his fingers, rubs feeling back into his arms, touches the places where the mask left red grooves across his skin. "This is better," he says quietly. "Thank you."

Barney is considering him again, that steady evaluating gaze. “You’re not like the other people in here, are you, Mr. Graham?”

Will has been told all his life that he isn’t like other people, so he finds it depressing that even in an institution full of criminals with abnormal psychologies, his psychology still somehow manages to stand out. He can only shrug.

“You’re different,” Barney continues.

“I’ve always been different,” Will mutters, not making eye contact.

“Nah, I’m not talking about that kind of different.”

Now Will looks at him.

“The kind of different I mean is, well,” and suddenly Barney is leaning forward and depositing a heavy object into Will’s open hand, “you are *innocent*.”

And Will looks down and sees that Barney has given him a cell phone.

“From Miss Katz,” Barney clarifies.

Will doesn’t know what to say. He can’t fathom what he could have said, what he could have ever done, to deserve this vote of pure confidence from Barney.

But Barney, as always, isn’t asking for a thank you. His expression is clear, determined. He closes Will’s fingers over the smooth surface of the phone.

“You catch your killer, Mr. Graham.”

Then he leaves the cell, locking the door behind him.

Slowly Will clutches the phone to his chest. He is out of his restraints. He has a lifeline to the outside world. People believe him. The sun is rising. The tide is turning.

He stands up and sees Gideon watching him with a narrow resentful expression on his face. Will is so elated that he acts purely on impulse. He raises his arms, gives Gideon an ironic little bow and says:

“And now for my next trick!"

Beverly calls him from the I-83.

“Hello,” Will whispers into the phone, smiling widely despite himself. He is very aware of Gideon watching him, overcome with seething envy.

“Hey!” says Beverly. “You got your arms free, huh?”

“Yeah.”

“That’s good; I wasn’t sure how you were gonna answer the phone otherwise. That’s my personal line, so if my mom calls, make sure you tell her you’re not my boyfriend. Or—you know what?—tell her you *are* my boyfriend. That should get her off my back for a while. As long as you don’t mention you’re in a mental hospital.”

Will clutches the phone tightly to his ear. He doesn’t know how Beverly can be so flip at a moment like this. “Why’d you give this to me?” he asks.

“You said last time we tried something like this that you wanted to stay connected. Seemed like a good idea. You get to stay sane and I get somebody to talk to. It’s win/win.”

“How far away are you from West York?”

“About twenty minutes. I can’t exactly speed when I’m being followed by two sedans full of FBI agents.”

“You’re sure they’re the only people following you?”

In his mind’s eye, he sees Beverly checking her mirrors, scanning the mostly empty highway.

“I’m sure,” she says. “Hang in there, Will. I’m almost there.”

They hang up to preserve battery power. Will scoots into the corner of his cell, cradling the warm phone in his hands. The variables swirl in his mind, colliding with each other like atoms at the point of fusion.

He knows that when Alana calls Hannibal and tells him what has happened, Hannibal’s first thought will be West York. He will go there to make sure his storage unit hasn’t been compromised. It will have occurred to him that Beverly might have an extra key, and that Alana’s discovery will only hasten Beverly’s raid on the unit. Will has no idea where Hannibal is right now at six in the morning. Not in bed. (For Alana, after all, is out of bed…) What if, when Hannibal receives the call, he happens to be in shorter driving distance to West York than Beverly? What happens then?

Will now feels true regret at having cut Hannibal loose. He thought it would distract him, neutralize him, send him to a dark cave to lick his wounds. But really the impulse to hurt Hannibal was as vicious and petty and low as the original impulse to bite him. Will shouldn’t have acted on it. If he had kept Hannibal happy, placid, he might not be living in such fear now. Now Hannibal will want to hurt Will; he will want to hurt him badly.

Will clutches the phone to his chest again, like it is in itself a tiny life for him to cherish and protect.

Twenty minutes later, Beverly calls again. “I’m here. I’m in the lot.”

“No sign of Lecter?”

“His Bentley isn’t parked here, if that’s what you mean.”

She stops the car. Checks her gun. Takes the copy she made of the little key. Re-secures the Bluetooth earpiece she’s wearing. Zips her coat. Slams the car door. Will hears the meaty crunch of Beverly’s boots on gravel and the scene begins to blossom in his mind. Early morning. A big sky, steely and oppressive. Beverly with her uninjured hand jammed nonchalantly in her pocket, walking across the parking lot. She throws a casual wave at her protective detail as they climb out of their cars. The four men form up behind her like an honor guard and she leads them up to the gated door of Elite Storage Solutions.

“What’s this all about, Katz?” one of the agents asks her.

“It’s just some legwork for a case. Sorry we have to do this so early, Sacks. How about I buy you guys breakfast when we’re done?”

Murmurs of approval from the agents. Beverly knows how to make herself popular.

She walks past the storage office, greeting the guard there. Her footsteps change as she enters the facility, loud steps on hard concrete, a very big echo. The place must be massive, the size of an aircraft hangar. So that’s what Will sees: a hangar, low-slung but cavernously wide, with thousands of units and lockers arranged in towering rows like freight crates. Beverly walks the maze of aisles purposefully, her uninjured hand resting on the butt of her holstered gun. She has already performed her reconnaissance. She knows exactly where she’s going.

“I’m almost there,” she says to Will.

“I’m with you,” he says. And he is. He sees her vividly as she stops in front of a very large unit with a rollup overhead metal door.

“I’m there,” she says.

“Anyone else there with you?”

“Just my guys.”

“You’re sure?”

“Pretty sure.”

“Stay alert,” he tells her.

A soft snort from Beverly. “Thanks for the advice.” She turns to the other FBI agents. “Can you cover the aisle? I’m going into this unit here. Come after me if I’m not out in ten, ok?”

“Bring them in with you,” says Will.

“I know what I’m doing,” she tells him swiftly. “Cover the aisle, guys. Both ends. Thanks.”

The FBI agents split up and fan out as they take their stations at either end of the long aisle. Beverly brings out her copy of the little key, their second chance at catching Hannibal Lecter. She crouches down in front of the lock and inserts the key—or tries to.

Will hears her struggling with it. She grunts and mutters to herself: "Come on…Come on." Then suddenly she leans back. The sounds of struggling cease.

"Will," she says, her voice tight, "we have a problem."

Will's hands are sweating against the phone. "What happened?"

"The key won't fit."

Will is very aware of Dr. Gideon listening in with a fiendish grin. "What do you mean?" he whispers.

"What do you think I mean? It doesn't unlock the fucking door!"

"You're sure you have the right unit?"

"*Positive*."

"Maybe something went wrong when you made the copy."

Beverly's voice sounds very strained. "I don't see how that could've happened."

"Beverly," Will says quietly, "are you sure you made the switch correctly? You took the right key from him?"

"I thought I was sure. But now obviously I'm not. I don't know, Will. I was pretty distracted by…uh…well, by you."

Will closes his eyes tightly. "Yeah," he says. "Yeah, I can understand that."

"Fuck," says Beverly.

He sees her standing there, a miserable little figure dwarfed by the immensity of that massive space.

"It's ok," he whispers, somehow managing to keep the disappointment out of his voice.

"No, it's not." And suddenly Will hears the clunks of Beverly's boots as she starts sprinting.

"What are you doing?" he asks.

"Going back to the office. I'm gonna talk my way inside that unit, and I may need your help to do it. Stay here,"—she calls to her protective detail as she runs past them—"I'll be right back!"

The pounding thunder of her footsteps. It's such a big place that she's running for several minutes before she's back at the office.

“Hey,” she gasps, when she gets there. Her voice has taken on a high, ingratiating quality—the voice of a girl in distress. “I’m really sorry to bother you guys, really very sorry, but I just realized I forgot the key to my unit. Well, it’s my boss’s unit actually, and he’s gonna *fire* me if I don’t bring him back the porcelain flatware he asked me for. He needs it for a party this afternoon. Very important party. Is there—is there any way you guys could let me in? You’d be saving me my job.”

“Oh dear,” says the storage manager, his voice low and concerned. No doubt he has taken in not only Beverly’s panic, but also her bruised face and splinted arm. “Well I’d be happy to give you a new key, but we’d need your employer’s permission to do that.”

“Ok,” says Beverly. “Not a problem. I have him on the line with me,”—and she pauses, pointing at her earpiece—“so yeah, he gives you his permission.”

“What’s your employer’s name?”

“Hannibal Lecter.”

“And his passcode?”

“What?”

“The passcode for his account. If you have his passcode, I can issue you a new key.”

“The passcode…” says Beverly. “Dr. Lecter,” she says to Will, “what’s your passcode at Elite?”

“Um…” says Will, rubbing a hand over his eyes.

He can hear Beverly’s painful smile. She hisses through her teeth. “Dr. Lecter, do you know your passcode or not?”

Will is thinking fast and hard. “Give me a second.”

He can sense Beverly making some kind of pacifying gesture at the storage manager as she waits on tenterhooks for him to speak.

“Try ‘Mischa’.”

“Mischa?” Beverly repeats, uncertainly.

“One moment,” says the storage manager. “I’ll get you a key.”

“Oh thank you,” says Beverly. And then in an undertone to Will: “*How did you do that*?”

“Educated guess,” says Will, wiping the sweat from his face.

The manager comes back with a key for Beverly, who thanks him tremulously before she’s on her way again.

“What’s Mischa?” she asks him as she runs.

“His sister.”

“Of course. Will, you’re a genius. But how do you know her name?”

“I asked him.”

“Man,” she says, with a nervous chuckle. She holds up the new key, compares it with her copy. “This one’s definitely different from the one I’ve got. Sure, they look similar, but not similar enough. I must’ve taken the wrong one off his keychain. God, so dumb.”

“We’re all right now,” Will tells her, even though he doesn’t really feel all right.

Just then Beverly stops short of the storage unit, her breath catching in her throat.

“What’s wrong?” Will asks, on high alert.

“The agents are gone. They’re not in the aisle.”

Will takes this in. “Draw your gun. Don’t call out.”

Dr. Gideon hears this and scoots up next to the glass of his cell, watching Will’s expression with bright, gloating eyes.

“Way ahead of you,” Beverly whispers. With her gun raised, she begins walking down the aisle, keeping her footsteps soft so they won’t echo.

“No sign of them,” she says. “Nothing.”

“Go to the other end of the aisle,” he says. “But watch your back.”

Beverly reaches the end of the aisle and checks every angle, gun in front of her. “It’s clear.”

“Ok…” says Will, swallowing hard. “Beverly…there’s only one place he could be. He got there before you. He’s been in there all along. Inside the unit.”

“What happened to the agents?” Beverly asks. Her voice is shaking.

“You can’t save them.” Will squeezes his eyes tightly. “I think you should go back to the office. Keep your gun trained on that unit and head back. Beverly, do as I say.”

“I can’t do that, Will.”

Will’s voice rises. “He wants to take you by surprise, just like how he took them. He is counting on you to come in there after him. The second you open that door, he’s gonna be on you.”

“Yeah, I’m not really loving the serial killer inner monologue right now.” A note of frustration in Beverly’s voice. And then suddenly she’s calling out: “Dr. Lecter! Dr. Lecter, I

am asking you to open this door. There's nowhere for you to run. You know that. It'd be better if you just come quietly!"

Silence, except for Beverly breathing.

"Ok," she says, "I'm opening the door."

"Beverly, *no*."

"If there's any chance of saving their lives, I have to take it."

Will hears ripping noises, tearing Velcro; Beverly is removing her sling. She transfers the gun to her injured hand, pulls out the key with the other. She begins unlocking the storage unit door.

Will listens to her do it and is almost overcome with the urge to bite his nails. He wraps both hands around the phone to stop himself. Meanwhile Dr. Gideon is miming someone having their throat slit and bleeding out on the floor. Will tries very hard to ignore him.

The unit's door is heavy, hard to lift. It takes Beverly a full minute to send it sliding upward.

"Gun out," Will hisses. "Check your back."

She does as he says. "Clear," she whispers. She stares into the darkened unit, fully exposed by the folded-up door.

"What do you see?" Will breathes.

Beverly doesn't answer. "Dr. Lecter!" she calls again.

No answer. Will hears her heavy breathing as she steps deeper into the storage unit. She fumbles for a moment with the flashlight on her belt, draws it out with her injured arm. Lonely footsteps as she edges inside. Then a skittering noise, like fingers on metal. Beverly has found the light switch.

"Dr. Lecter?" she calls again. She puts the flashlight back on her belt and begins weaving through pieces of heavy furniture, leading with her gun.

"There's some weird stuff in here, Will. Weird art. No sign anyone's been here for a while. There's a lot of dust."

Will hears a shadow of relief in her voice. She doesn't sense danger. This could be good. But it also could be bad.

"I'm seeing racks of wine," she whispers. "A lot of sculpture. Really violent sculpture. Antiques. I don't know, I really don't think there's anybody here. One sec. There's—something."

Will hears her creeping forward. He doesn't know what she sees. He hears the airy sound of a sheet being pulled off a large object. "It's a car," Beverly breathes. "An old Mustang. Pretty

beat-up." And then, with a gasp, "Dr. Lecter! Hands where I can see them!"

Again, no answer. She's breathing very heavily now.

"What do you see?" Will hisses.

"There's someone in the passenger seat. He's not responding."

She steps up to the dark windows of the Mustang, peers inside.

"Beverly…"

"It's a mannequin," she says. "In a top hat? Fuck."

She opens the car door, pops the trunk. "Empty," she says. And then: "Will…"

He hears it in her voice. He knows.

"Keep looking," he says.

"But—"

"*Keep looking*."

"There's nowhere else to look," she says. "I'm going to take some samples from the car, but it doesn't seem like anyone's been driving it recently."

"Yeah…" says Will. Something is building up inside him, inside his throat. "Yeah, take some samples."

He hears Beverly scraping away. But then suddenly she straightens up. "Jesus, guys, where have you been?"

"We were looking for you!" says the agent named Sacks, ducking under the overhead door and entering the unit. "You're the one who disappeared!"

"I told you where I was going," says Beverly, but she sounds more relieved than annoyed.

"You're not supposed to run from your detail, Katz. Could have gotten us all in a lot of trouble. Everything all right in here?"

"Yeah," says Beverly. "I'll be finished in a minute. Can you go back to covering the aisle for me? Don't wander off!" And when the agents have gone, she says: "Will…"

And now there is something in her voice he really doesn't like. Something that creeps underneath his skin and begins to eat at him.

"There's nothing here," she says. "No bodies. No organs. No blood. Nothing."

He has to try three times before he can get his voice to work. "You're sure?"

“I mean,” Beverly swallows, “there’s a lot of questionable art, but I can’t arrest the guy for bad taste.”

Will covers his face with his hand. A minute ago he was terrified Beverly was going to find something. Now he finds himself even more terrified at the prospect that she has found nothing at all.

“Do you think he could have beaten us here?” she asks him. “Cleaned the whole place out? But it’s covered in dust. It’s undisturbed. I just don’t get this.”

Will can hear Dr. Gideon laughing at him.

“We must have guessed wrong,” Beverly says. “Could he be keeping the bodies somewhere else?”

“Maybe,” he whispers, but he can’t cover up the fact that his voice is rasping badly.

“I’m really sorry, Will.”

The hand over his eyes comes away wet.

“We’re going to keep looking,” says Beverly. “We’ll find a way to catch him. This is a setback, I know. But we can get through this. You can get through this.”

He hears the doubt in her voice, plain as day. She doubts her ability to keep doing this. She doubts his ability to keep doing this. She doubts him.

He screws up his face, tugs at his hair. “Sure,” he says, in a small voice. “Yeah. ‘Course we can.”

“After your trial,” says Beverly, in a voice of forced calm, “we will find a way to talk.”

Your trial. It resonates inside him like a heavy gong. The words have never been so fraught with meaning. His trial. When is it? In three days? In two? It has never seemed real to him until this moment.

“I’m finished here,” says Beverly. “I’m gonna drive back to Quantico now. I’ll run these samples and get back to you. Give Barney that phone when you get a chance, ok?”

“Ok,” he croaks.

“Hang in there, Will.” And now he hears her desperation, her unmasked concern.

“Thank you, Beverly,” he whispers. “Thank you for everything.”

He hangs up the phone. His hands are shaking terribly. He uses them to cover his face again.

“Was that the trick?” Dr. Gideon asks him. “I can’t say I’m impressed...”

Will rocks back and forth against the padded wall. He can't think. There was supposed to be evidence inside that unit. Everything pointed to it. He sacrificed so much to get inside that unit. He let everyone go. He thought he wouldn't need them any more. But now he is alone and he has nothing to show for it. Why was the unit empty? What did he get wrong?

It is at this moment that something dreadful happens inside of him. His imagination takes a fatal leap. A horrifying voice—a voice without mercy or understanding or pity and yet somehow still resembling Will's own voice—whispers in his ear:

You. Made. It. Up.

He slaps his hands over his ears, but it's too late. The thought swells and germinates and multiplies until a thousand similar thoughts like a fast-growing tumor lodged at the base of his brain.

He could have made it up. Maybe it started with a hallucination brought on by the encephalitis, a hallucination so vivid as to seem infallibly real, and he took that strange certainty and he clung to it even after he was cured, because his reality was too terrible to comprehend, so instead he clung to his dream, he clung to it and clung to it, and as everyone began telling him to drop it, he just held on all the tighter, expounding on it, theorizing, his imagination filling in every detail, adding light and air and color, breathing so much life into the delusion that he began seeing evidence everywhere he looked. Inside his mind he created a killer, a spectacular killer, a master of his craft, an amalgamation of every killer Will had ever profiled, a possessor of all of their strengths and none of their weaknesses, the killer to end all killers, and then Will projected this killer—this mythical beast—on to the blank screen that was his loyal psychiatrist's singularly unreadable face. And Dr. Lecter permitted him to do this, because Dr. Lecter is an eccentric, an unconventional healer who believes that poison itself can be the cure. Is it really so farfetched to believe he might have encouraged Will's delusion, played along—*role-played*—either because he was hoping in time to expose it for the lie it truly was, or because he was ensuring Will fell so deeply into his fantasy that Dr. Lecter would have enough material to publish book after book about his famous patient? Isn't that so much easier to believe? A clearer explanation of all the facts? So much more persuasive than the ludicrous fable of an ingeniously manipulative cannibalistic serial killing mastermind, morbidly obsessed with Will, intent on engaging him in a high stakes chess match. How could he have ever believed that? How could anyone? It is crazy. It is crazy. It is crazy.

This entire train of thought roars through Will's mind in the blink of an eye. And then it is over. He is back to himself again. Strange little noises are coming out of him, barely human. He lies sideways on the floor, covering his head as if blows are raining down on him from above.

His defenses kick in. He *knows* he didn't make it up. There is evidence. Circumstantial evidence, yes, but enough of it to convince Beverly, who is no fool. And even without the evidence Will knows what he has seen. Hannibal's mask has slipped too many times for there to be any doubt about what he is. And then there is Gideon, fifteen feet away, a witness to the infernal machinations of the real Hannibal. Of course Will didn't make that Hannibal up. Of course he didn't.

(*Gideon thinks Hannibal is a vampire. He isn't a reliable witness. Neither are you*.)

"Shut up!" Will moans.

But doubt isn't something to be silenced. Doubt isn't something you can experience and then make yourself forget. Doubt sticks with you. Doubt makes a home for itself underneath your skin, in every chamber of your heart. He will never again be able to hate Hannibal with the same conviction. He will never be able to believe in himself, in this fight, with the same purity of spirit. Now he has seen his situation from the outside, he has borne witness to the house of cards in which he has been living, and he will never be able to un-see it, no matter how hard he tries. It's the autostereogram all over again. The disorder of his mind suddenly ordered in a design too compelling to be readily dismissed.

Checkmate.

Eldon Stammets is singing hymns again:

"Abide with me; fast falls the eventide
The darkness deepens; Lord with me abide."

Will lies on the padded floor of his cell, listening absently to Stammets, not moving, not thinking, everything shutting down. Systems failure. He feels the doubt moving inside him, spreading, a parasite sucking away at his strength. With every minute that passes he feels more and more hollowed out. He is dying by inches, dwindling away inside this terrible place.

"*When other helpers fail and comforts flee;*
Help of the helpless, O abide with me."

A low sound, like an animal growling. Winston? The stag? Will opens his eyes and sees the sound is actually the phone vibrating against the padded floor. On automatic he picks up the call and puts the phone to his ear. He doesn't speak.

The voice on the line says: "Beverly, hi. I really need to talk to you."

It takes Will a long time to recognize the caller. "Alana," he rasps.

Dr. Gideon hears him say it. He looks up at Will with renewed interest. "Shhh..." he says to Stammets, who is still singing. "Looks like the show's not over…"

Alana falters. "Who is this? Who am I speaking to?"

"Will."

"*Will*? How did you get a phone?"

"Beverly gave it to me." He doesn't care about lying any more. He doesn't have the energy left to get away with it.

Alana heaves a sigh. "Of course she did."

“Why do you want to talk to her?”

A long silence on the line. Alana is hesitating. But then she says, “I’m just—I’m trying to understand.”

Will rubs his face, wipes the tears away. “What are you trying to understand?”

“Everything!” Her voice rises impatiently. “Why she believes you, why everyone is lying to me, why the two of you stole the key to Hannibal’s wine cooler. I just want to be able to understand it all, preferably without any obfuscation or subterfuge or misdirection. I want—”

But Will interrupts her. He is sitting up, his whole body buzzing. “It’s the key to his wine cooler?”

“Yes,” says Alana. “At least, that’s what I believe it to be. Did you think it was something different?” She doesn’t wait for an answer—words just come pouring out of her, a forceful torrent. “The other day I asked him about the cooler. I asked him why he kept it locked, and I saw something change in his face, and he *saw* I saw. He’s been acting so strangely lately, Will, especially after—after you bit him. I don’t know how best to describe it, but it’s as if he has become an unconvincing impersonation of himself. I don’t believe he’s violent, but I’m worried…I don’t know, I think he might be having some kind of nervous breakdown. He has trouble sleeping. It’s been getting worse and worse. He’s had insomnia ever since he was a child, but this is pronounced, this is dangerous, most nights he hasn’t even been going to bed. I’m worried about him. I’m worried for his health. He’s not going to like it that you took that key. It’s going to be very upsetting for him.”

She is like an un-stoppered bottle of suspicions, anxiety, and desperate concern. She has had no one in whom she can confide, no one speaking to her honestly. Everywhere she turns, lies and more lies. Alone in the dark with her mounting doubts. It must have been so lonely. And then she discovered Beverly. Beverly who took the leap of faith that Alana could never bring herself to take, and suddenly the impossible has become possible for Alana; she has found the words to describe the unspeakable.

Will understands all of this in a heartbeat. He understands *her*.

“You haven’t told him about the key,” he says, quietly.

“Not yet. I—I have it here. I’m looking at it.”

He swallows heavily. “Where are you right now?”

“His house. In the kitchen.”

And he can see her, sitting there on one of the high stools. Her purse resting at her side and the key lying innocently on the cold marble countertop in front of her. And Will knows immediately why she has really called, what she wants to do.

“Where is he?” he asks.

“At his office. At least…”

She doesn't complete this sentence, but Will understands. "That's where he told you he'd be."

He can feel her nodding. "Will…" she whispers, looking at the cool glow of the inset lights shining on the wine bottles, "what's inside that cooler?"

"I don't know," he says. "And I don't want you to find out. Listen to me carefully, Alana. This is what you're going to do. Take the key, leave the house, and drive to Quantico. Call Jack on the way, tell him your suspicions."

"But I don't know if I have suspicions! I don't know what to believe." She hides her face with one hand. "God, this is all so absurd."

"I know it's absurd," says Will, gently. "Please, just humor me. If it all turns out to be a big mistake, that's ok. No harm done, right?"

She isn't really listening to him. She is worrying at the key, spinning it frantically between her fingers. "What's in there, Will?" she asks again. "I know you know. Please tell me."

"Something you don't want to see."

She lets out another drawn-out, almost musical sigh. "Ok. I guess…I guess I'll call Jack then. Let him know I—uh—have this. Let him deal with it. That's the right thing to do, right?"

"Yes," says Will. "It's the right thing. Leave the house now, Alana."

"Ok." She grabs her purse, zips away the key. He hears the nervous snap of her high heels on the kitchen floor as she exits the room and starts down the hallway. "This is so absurd," she breathes, more to herself than to him. "So absurd."

And suddenly she has stopped walking. "I'm sorry…I—I can't."

"Alana—"

"I just can't. You told me once that I see only what I want to see. Well, I want to see this. I have to."

And she spins around. She is back in the kitchen. She is pulling the little key out of her purse and approaching the wine cooler.

"Alana—Alana, please stop—you don't want to do that—you really don't—"

"Stop telling me what I want," she says, as she works the key into the lock. And Will prays, *prays*, that the key won't fit, that Alana's search for the truth ends right here in much the same way as Beverly's almost did, but he's out of luck. The key unlocks the door. Alana swings it open. A note of triumph in her voice.

"It's only *wine*, Will. It is a cooler full of very fine wine."

Will says nothing. He is biting his nails. He is waiting. He can see Gideon and Stammets both up against the glass of their cells, watching his every move.

“But—” Alana’s voice catches. “There’s—a hinge on the wine rack. It’s a second door.”

Will can’t speak.

“I’m opening it.” Alana pushes the wine rack and it swings backwards with a high ghostly creak.

Silence. Alana takes it in. “It’s a room,” she whispers. “A hidden room.”

The phone is hot against Will’s hand. He doesn’t even dare to breathe. All his faculties are bent on listening to Alana as she steps over the threshold into Hannibal Lecter’s secret room.

The gentlest click as her heel descends onto cold tile. “It’s like a freezer,” she says. And he sees her, shaking and pale, her breath billowing around her in a mist. “There’s some plastic sheeting like what you’d find at a…a butcher’s.”

If he can’t stop her from doing this, then at least he can be with her; he can help her.

“Close the door behind you.” His voice is shaking. “Both doors.”

“Good idea.” He hears the soft snap of the glass door closing and the high creak of the disguised second door swinging shut.

“Ok,” says Alana. “I’m pushing past the sheeting, but it’s hard to see what I’m doing. It’s really dark now.”

“He’d need light in there, to—to work.”

“I’ll try to find it. Will…” Alana’s voice displays the barest hesitation. “It smells…really bad.”

“Find the light,” he says.

“Ok…” Now Alana’s voice is distant. She must be using her phone as a flashlight. “I’ve got it—I—” And she doesn’t so much gasp as heave. Her hands fly up to her mouth to muffle the sounds. “Ohhhh,” she says.

And then a crashing sound. The phone hits the floor and bounces.

“ALANA!”

Will moves so fast his head spins. He’s up against the glass of his cell—pounding his fists against it. “Help!” he shouts. “Somebody, help me! I need help in here! Hello!”

Dr. Gideon and Stammets, watching him panic, their expressions impassive.

“Help! Somebody help me! Help! Help!”

And suddenly Will has an echo. “Hey! Hey! We need help down here! There’s a woman being murdered!”

It's Lawrence Wells, one cell over.

"What's wrong with you two?" he shouts at Stammets and Gideon. "How can you just sit back and listen to that? Help him out."

And with that, all the merry murderers of the cellblock are up and shouting for help, pounding their fists against the glass. Gideon does it with particular relish: "Hey hey hey! Lady being murdered! Lady being murdered! Anybody care? Hello?"

"Alana!" Will screams into the phone, as he presses one hand hard against the glass, as if he might break it and come running out to help her. "Alana, can you hear me?"

Barney sprints down the hall, eyes wide. Gideon points the way to Will's cell, his eyes gleaming. "Mr. Graham's doing a magic trick," he says. "How about that?"

Barney comes up to the glass, staring in at Will, who still has the phone pressed to his ear. He hears nothing on the line, but he can't hang up.

"I need you to call the police," he says. In a shaking voice he tells Barney Hannibal's home address. "Do it now. Please."

And Barney is off running down the hall.

Suddenly Will hears sounds of the phone getting scooped up. Relief floods his body as he hears Alana's voice again. "Sorry," she says. "I dropped the phone."

"Alana—" He can't speak. He throws one shaking hand over his eyes and signals for Gideon and company to stop shouting.

"There are a lot of bodies in here, Will." Alana is speaking in a bizarrely businesslike voice, as if making a report. "I'm counting at least ten."

"Alana," Will doesn't know whether to laugh or cry, "why are you counting the bodies!?"

But she just keeps on going. She needs to talk, she needs to hear the sound of her own artificially calm voice. She is treating what lies before her as a case, in the hopes that she might contain these horrors through a careful application of clinical words.

"They all appear well-preserved. Some are hanging on hooks over a drain. Many of them are in various states of—of dismemberment. There's a metal table with a great deal of heavy-duty tools. Bone saws, drills, some kind of cudgel….ooh."

And her breathing picks up, begins to sound like hyperventilation. "Abigail…"

Will can't listen to this any more. "Alana, you have to go. Please listen. You have to listen. Get out of there right now."

"Oh you poor thing," whispers Alana. "Oh your face. But he loved this girl, Will. He loved her. How could he—how could he do this? I don't…this doesn't make any sense."

"*For the love of God, Alana—*"

"Ok," she gasps. "Sorry, yes, ok, I'm going. But shouldn't I take some pictures first? He can't —if he destroys this, how are we—how are we going to convict him? How are we going to exonerate you?"

"I really don't care about that right now," says Will.

"Well, I do." And suddenly Alana is breathing steadily again. "I care. Give me a minute. I'll take some pictures. While I'm doing that, I want you to call Jack. Call him and tell him what I found, ok? I will call you back in exactly one minute. Exactly a minute. By then, I'll have some pictures, and I'll be on my way."

"I'd rather you just left right now."

"One minute," she says. "Please call Jack for me. Bye."

And she hangs up.

With shaking hands, Will scrolls through Beverly's contacts, finds Jack's number. He listens to it ring as he paces back and forth by the glass.

"This is Crawford." Jack's voice, as firm and steady as ever.

"Jack!" Will gasps. "It's Will!"

A very heavy pause. "How did you get access to a phone?"

"I don't have time to explain. I need you to go to Hannibal Lecter's house. Send an emergency response unit there right away."

Jack sighs. "Really?" he says. "We doing this now?"

For fuck's sake. "Alana is there," says Will. "She's found evidence, human remains, the remains of Abigail Hobbs—I really don't have time to convince you here, Jack. You just have take my word and go. Go there now. Please do this for me."

Silence on the line. Then: "You need help, Will."

"I'M NOT THE ONE WHO NEEDS HELP," screams Will. "GET OVER THERE."

His minute is nearly up. He terminates the call before Jack can say another word.

An instant later the phone rings. He jabs it back against his ear.

"Alana?"

"Hi, Will," she says. Her voice sounds very strained.

He is struck momentarily mute with relief. "You're out?"

“I—yes,” she says.

“Good. That’s good. Alana, here’s what you’re going to do next. Take a knife from the kitchen: it doesn’t have to be a big one, just one that’s sharp. I want you to turn on the light in each room before you walk through it. Keep your back to the walls whenever you can. Do that until you reach the front door, ok?”

He realizes halfway through this speech that Alana has put him on speakerphone.

“Alana? Alana, are you listening to me?”

Silence on the line.

“*Alana*?”

And then the silence on the line is broken. “Hello, Will,” says Hannibal.

It is as if the whole world closes in on him at once. He can’t breathe. Lights pop and flash before his eyes.

“We find ourselves in something of a situation here,” Hannibal continues evenly, tactfully ignoring the wheezing sounds Will is making. “Perhaps you might care to assist?”

“Please…” Will whispers. “Please…”

“Please what?” inquires Hannibal.

“The police are coming. You have only minutes…”

“Minutes are all I need.”

Will can hear Alana’s hitching breath. Hannibal is standing behind her with a knife to her throat.

“No,” says Will. “No no no no no no.”

“We are going to have a conversation now,” says Hannibal. “The three of us.”

He releases Alana and directs her down onto a kitchen stool. “Please keep your hands on the countertop,” he tells her.

“Hannibal,” she says, her voice gone guttural, “please don’t do this…”

He acts as if she hasn’t spoken. “Why don’t we have a drink? There is a bottle of Krug Clos du Mesnil I’ve been saving for a special occasion. I believe this qualifies. Yes, let’s open it. The door to my cooler is, after all, already unlocked.”

“There isn’t time for this,” Will hisses at him. “The police are on their way.”

“As you’ve said.”

A cork popping—loud as a gunshot.

“Hannibal, stop…” says Will, pleadingly.

And a note of brutality creeps into Hannibal’s voice. “Will, if you continue being tiresome, I will put you on hold.”

Hannibal pours out the champagne into a flute. “Oh, but what am I thinking?” he says. “I am being unspeakably rude. Alana, I’ve forgotten your preference for beer. I do have one bottle left of your private reserve. Fitting, I suppose.”

He turns his back to fetch it from the refrigerator, and the next instant Alana is up and running, screaming for help.

Hannibal tsks to himself softly, puts the beer on the table and then stalks after her. He has left the phone behind; Will can hear the sounds of struggle only faintly.

“Please,” he whispers to himself, “please, please, please.”

Distant screams—a very loud thump.

“Oh, God…” says Will.

Barney has returned to the corridor. “They’re on their way,” he says to Will. “They’re coming.”

Will covers his face and says nothing, listens with all his might as he hears heavy footsteps, dragging sounds, getting louder and louder.

“If you are attempting to attract the attention of my protective detail,” Hannibal says to Alana, “then perhaps I should tell you that they are both—ah—*off* duty. Permanently. A regrettable necessity. They were good agents. Adequate company. Had they been anything less, I would have done more than break their necks. But it seems the FBI takes only the best, eh?”

Alana doesn’t answer him. She is weeping.

“Beer for you,” says Hannibal, putting a glass in front of her. “Champagne for me. And champagne for Will.” He fills a second flute and lays it on the countertop. “To us,” he says, and drinks.

“You need to stop this,” Will says.

Hannibal swallows his champagne. “I want my questions answered first.” And he turns to Alana. “Why did you choose *The Count of Monte Cristo*?”

“What?” she gasps, utterly confused.

“Why did you read *The Count of Monte Cristo* to Will when he was in the hospital?”

Nothing but the most incongruous polite curiosity in Hannibal's voice.

"*That's* what you want to ask me?" Despite her terror, some of Alana's self-possession is returning to her.

"Yes," says Hannibal. "I have always wondered. At the time I admired you for your choice. For your *belief*. I assumed you chose *The Count of Monte Cristo* because you knew, even then, that Will was not responsible for the murders he had been accused of committing."

"I—I—I don't know," says Alana. "Yes—maybe—I don't know. I always knew, I knew he was innocent—"

"*He is not innocent—*" And the force of Hannibal's fury silences Alana instantly. "By no means innocent. He may not have committed those particular murders, but that does not make him an innocent. Look what he has done to you, Alana. Look where he has placed you. You, who trusted him. You, who fought for him."

And now Hannibal speaks to Will. "*Why did you let her open that door*?"

In his voice, naked disappointment, something resembling hurt. A god who cannot understand why his beloved creations have so blatantly defied him.

"I warned you," Hannibal continues, "not to send further people to my door. I made myself very clear on that point. Clearer than I needed to be. You might have listened. You should have listened. Why must you insist on flouting me?"

Will's heart is in his throat, but he looks into Barney's eyes on the other side of the glass and somehow he is able to speak calmly. "You don't have to hurt her," he tells Hannibal. "You know you don't."

Hannibal growls in frustration. "I don't *have* to do anything. I do what I want to do."

"But you don't want to do this."

The barest exhale. "Don't I?" And perhaps Hannibal means this as a threat but to Will it doesn't sound like one—it sounds like an honest question. Hannibal doesn't know. Hannibal is uncertain.

"You don't," Will says, firmly. "You don't. What good does it do you? It's over either way. The police will be there any minute. Take your head start and run. Come on, Hannibal. Run! *Please*!"

"Hannibal, please…" Alana echoes, faintly. "Please, listen to him."

Hannibal takes a long breath through his nose. "Do you know how many people I have heard begging for their lives? They fall to their knees, they debase themselves entirely in pursuit of the smallest chance that I might take pity on them, that I might preserve the lives they have so thoughtlessly squandered. Begging does not induce pity in me. It never has. Where is your imagination, Will? I am disappointed."

And Will understands, in a meteoric flash that actually causes him to sway dizzily against the glass, what it is that Hannibal wants from him. He had promised himself he would never do it —but he knew, he always knew, it was a promise Hannibal would never allow him to keep.

He throws all his scruples to the winds, swings the pendulum, and begins speaking to Hannibal in Hannibal's own voice.

"You are not going to kill her. You have no desire to kill her and no compelling justification for doing so. Why betray yourself with such a messy act? If you wish to hurt me, then hurt me. If you wish to hurt yourself, then hurt yourself. Hannibal, are you listening to me?"

"Yes," says Hannibal. "I am listening." He is drawing the phone close to his ear with both hands. Meanwhile Alana looks on, eyes wide, transfixed.

"What you are feeling right now is a juvenile impulse, the impulse of a child who wishes to break his toys rather than see their ownership pass to someone else. This impulse is beneath you, Hannibal. It is beneath you. You mustn't act on it. Act on it now and you will regret it later. You do not want to feel regret, Hannibal. You have felt it only once before. Hannibal, do you understand me?"

Silence. Will can hear Hannibal breathing into the phone as if trying to inhale him.

"Oh Will…" he whispers. "Dear Will. My better angel. Yes, I understand you. And I cannot deny that you understand me. But…I think…you are forgetting…that sometimes… I do not understand *myself*."

The pendulum stops.

"Hannibal…" Will says. "No…"

"I have a six-inch straight boning knife in my right hand," says Hannibal. "I am approaching from the left. I'll let you do the rest."

"HANNIBAL!"

Alana is screaming.

"Enjoy your freedom," says Hannibal. He puts down the phone.

And Will sees it even though he is desperate not to see it. He sees it so vividly that it may as well be happening in his cell. He drinks her terror as she struggles. He feels the sting of her fingernails against his forearms. He experiences the moment of release when the blade enters her body. The sudden weight as Alana collapses against Hannibal—against him—and he holds her gently, a final embrace.

Will doesn't hear himself, but there is nothing to hear—he is screaming without sound. Barney on the other side of the glass, watching him, not knowing what to do. The other inmates silent and listening, grave, old hands at bearing witness to death.

Hannibal lays Alana down on the kitchen floor. He puts the knife on the counter. He finishes his champagne. And then, after a moment of thoughtful silence, he picks up the phone again. But he does not speak into it. He has nothing more to say. He puts the phone down next to where Alana lies, a few inches from her twitching fingers. Wipes his hands clean on a kitchen towel. Takes one last look at this sacred space he has constructed for himself. Then he leaves, embarking on his new life as a fugitive.

Will against the glass, on his knees, still clutching the phone. He isn't in the kitchen any more. He isn't in his cell. He is nowhere. Total darkness. But then he's brought back to himself by the sounds of a quiet voice calling his name.

"…Will…"

"Alana," he whispers, knuckles white against the phone.

"It doesn't hurt," she says. "I must be in shock…."

"Hold on. You have to hold on. The police are coming."

"I don't think he wanted me to feel pain…"

Will can't speak. His chest is heaving.

"He went out through the dining room doors," Alana says, her voice growing fainter by the second. "I…don't think he's taking his car. Probably…probably he's taking the FBI agents' car. Tell…tell Jack, ok? It will help…"

"That's good. That's—that's helpful."

She coughs. "He was always talking about Florence… He loves Florence… And Buenos Aires…mentioned it too…He would love to live there… Tell Jack."

"Tell him yourself," sobs Will.

"…I'll try…" She coughs again, a wet cough. "Sorry, Will…"

"No."

"…I didn't believe you…should have believed you…wanted to…"

"Alana, not now. Please not now."

"Has to be now… Dad always said…I fell for the bad ones…I tried to prove him wrong…I just…I thought the bad one was you! I should have realized… always… second-guessing…"

And Will hears sirens. "The police are here," he says to Alana. "Stay with me now, you're almost there."

"I wish…you could hold my hand…"

“So do I. Stay with me, ok?”

“I’ll try…”

“Alana? Alana, stay with me now. They’ll be with you any second. Alana? Alana, stay with me. Please, Alana. Alana, stay. Stay.”

Will hears the distant pounding of the police forcing open the front door.

"Stay..." he says. "Stay. Please stay. Oh, stay. Alana..."

He hears shouting and footsteps, the familiar sounds of first responders on a crime scene.

“Stay…” he says. “Stay…”

Dimly he is aware of Eldon Stammets singing ‘Abide with Me’ again:

> *“I fear no foe, with Thee at hand to bless;*
> *Ills have no weight, and tears no bitterness.*
> *Where is death’s sting? Where, grave, thy victory*
> *I triumph still, if Thou abide with me.”*

Barney puts his large palm up against the glass—the only expression of sympathy available to him. And as the emergency responders kneel next to Alana and find her dead, Will reaches out, despite the forces endeavoring to drag him down, and lays his trembling hand over Barney’s, nothing but the pane of glass between them.

Chapter 24

Chapter Summary

Will goes back to therapy.

Freedom, like grief, unfolds in stages.

First the orderlies come. Barney stands aside, his presence a silent reminder that the men should be gentle as they fix shackles around Will's wrists and ankles. When they march him out of his chamber, the other patients observe the parade in total silence. Lawrence Wells is solemn and nods his grizzled head as Will passes. Eldon Stammets, misty-eyed, raises a hand. Only Dr. Gideon refrains from a gesture of goodbye. His face is hardened, frozen, but there is a shade of something desolate in his eyes. It will be Gideon's expression of stifled envy that lodges itself in Will's memory, after.

They take him up a flight of stairs, back to the basement. They unchain him inside a cell that looks very like his old cell, except the bed has swapped places with the desk. A mirror image of his former life.

Will has no reaction to his altered circumstances. He sits down on the end of the bed and waits. Barney keeps coming back to check on him, but he doesn't try to talk, for which Will is grateful. He can't talk right now, cannot say a word.

But he is in this cell for less than an hour before he is transferred again. This time the orderlies put only a simple pair of handcuffs on him and instead of prodding him out of the cell, they stand by and ask him, "Can you come with us, please?" as if he has the option of saying no. But Will doesn't say no. Will doesn't say anything. They escort him up four flights of stairs, until they reach the top floor of the hospital. The orderlies unlock a door and usher him into a little garret room with a curtained window and a twin bed with patterned sheets. They remove the handcuffs and Will sits down on the end of this bed, too. He looks out the window. Through the bars he can see the sky, ditchwater gray.

One of the orderlies asks him, "Are you comfortable? Can I get you anything?"

Will doesn't answer these questions, because he doesn't know how to answer them.

When the orderlies leave, they lock the door behind them.

Will sits there and thinks of nothing. It takes concentration and effort for him to think of nothing.

Again Barney looks in on him, this time bringing with him a ceramic mug full of weak herbal tea. He watches patiently as Will drinks the whole thing, and then Barney takes a seat in the corner of the room. Will is grateful he is staying. Will doesn't want to be alone.

Whenever there is a knock on the little garret door, Barney gets up to answer it, and speaks with the visitor in lowered voices in the hallway. Will understands that Barney has appointed himself Will's emissary to the outside world, and Will is grateful for this, too. He has the vaguest sense of the administrative chaos he has created inside the hospital. He is bouncing from cell to cell to cell because Chilton doesn't know what to do with him. Let Chilton scramble. Will can stay in limbo for a long while yet.

The click of high heels in the hallway makes his heart stop. Barney answers the knock, and when he returns to the little room he has Nigella Karim with him. Her hair is curled, her blazer is sharp, but her professional aspect is more muted than usual.

"You feel like talking to her?" Barney asks.

Will looks at Karim. Sees her red-rimmed eyes. He nods to Barney, who leaves the two of them alone.

Karim takes Barney's chair. "Can I get you anything, Will? Anything to make you more comfortable?"

Those questions, again. Will shakes his head.

Karim folds her fingers around the handle of the briefcase in her lap. She looks at him and decides not to beat around the bush. "Your trial has been postponed. Give it another hour and it will be cancelled entirely. Our situation is changing very rapidly as information continues coming out. You can imagine the confusion."

Will says nothing. He isn't imagining anything right now.

"I don't want to speak too soon, but at this point it is clear to me that your release from this institution is a matter of when, not if. It could be as soon as in a couple hours. Jack Crawford has been cashing in a lot of favors around D.C. The FBI Director called Dr. Chilton this morning and the Attorney General is personally expediting your case. We're really only waiting on paperwork. I will have to go before a judge to get the charges against you officially dropped, but it's all going to be taken care of, Will, as quickly as we can manage it."

She pauses, looking a little disappointed. Will has displayed zero reaction to her amazing news.

"Are there any questions you'd like to ask me about what's happening? Anything I can do?"

He has to think about it. He turns away from her and looks out the little window again.

“My dogs,” he says eventually, his voice almost gone.

Karim nods encouragingly. “Of course. I’ll make sure they’re all right, that they’re being cared for until you are able to care for them yourself. As soon as you are released, you can take them back to Wolf Trap. Your house will be returned to you, your car, bank account, all of your possessions.”

He nods, not looking at her.

Now Karim shifts uncomfortably in her seat, and her hands tighten around her briefcase. When she speaks, her voice is very gentle—too gentle. “Will, you have had eight months of your life stolen from you. You have been institutionalized and medicated against your will. You’ve lost your job. You’ve had your reputation smeared in the press. I like to think I am receptive to my clients’ needs, that I listen to what they have to say. But I didn’t listen to you. For that I am very sorry.”

Will says nothing. He’d like for her to go.

Karim doesn’t expect a response. She is speaking to console herself, not him. The next words she speaks explode out of her, forceful and shaking:

“He will be caught. He will be caught and brought to justice. He will be made to pay for what he’s done.”

Will takes this in without surprise. “Then he hasn’t been caught.”

“Not yet. But he will be.” Karim’s hands are trembling against her briefcase. “He will be.”

Slowly Will’s eyes find her, and Karim balks a little under the intensity of his stare. He looks into her, down into the very heart of her, and then he speaks.

“How long did you know her?”

Karim’s mouth drops open. Liquid brightness creeps back into her eyes. She clears her throat with difficulty. “Long time. Since—since college.” She shakes her head, swipes quickly at her eyes. “I want you to know, I had the highest respect for her, as a colleague and as a friend. The very highest.”

Will says nothing, displays no visible reaction to any of this.

“He can’t get away,” says Karim, sniffling. “We can’t let him do that, Will.”

He says nothing.

She shivers a little as she looks at him. On some animal level she senses something wrong, that the reason he isn’t reflecting her pain is because he is absorbing it.

But she tries to ignore the eeriness of his stare. She pulls herself together. “I’ll come back with an update as soon as I know more. For now, I guess I’d better drive to Georgetown and —and see about your dogs.”

He watches her as she all but runs away from him.

Barney suggests he take a shower, and when Will enters the bathroom, he finds his own clothes laundered, folded, and plastic-wrapped, waiting for him on a bench. The same clothes he was wearing when he was arrested so many months ago. Will steps under the hard spray of the shower, the water battering his ears, and a sense of unreality descends on him, compounding the numbness. When he puts his own clothes on afterwards, they feel prickly and uncomfortable, like they don’t really fit. There is a mirror in the bathroom. Will fixes his collar, but he avoids his reflection’s eyes as assiduously as he would the eyes of a stranger.

Barney is waiting for him outside the door. “Dr. Chilton wants to see you.”

Without protest Will follows Barney back downstairs. He walks without handcuffs, with no restraints of any kind. Is this freedom? Has it happened yet?

Chilton stands up when they enter the room. “The man of the hour,” he says, in his most obsequious voice. “I can take him from here, Barney, thank you.”

Barney doesn’t look all that happy about leaving Will alone with Dr. Chilton, but he retreats from the room as ordered.

“Please sit down.” Chilton indicates one of the leather chairs across from his stately desk. “Are you comfortable? Can I get you something?”

Those questions, why those questions? What could he possibly need? Will says nothing, but he grudgingly sits down in the chair he occupied nearly a year ago, when he first met Dr. Chilton.

“I know just the thing.” Chilton steps over to an elaborate chestnut secretary and pulls out a bottle of scotch. “Glenmorangie 18 year. I know it’s early, but desperate measures, eh?”

He pours two generous glasses and sets them on his desk. Will doesn’t touch the drink.

“You’ve kept me sedated for the past twenty-four hours, Doctor.”

A stricken look from Chilton. “God, you’re right. My apologies. I had forgotten.” He toys at his own glass of scotch, sighing to himself. “It’s been a hard morning, Will. A very hard morning.” He picks up on the way Will is looking at him and adds, “But I don’t need to tell you that, of course.”

Now he takes a big gulp of scotch.

“I want to express my deepest sympathies. For what happened. Both today and over the course of the last eight months. Had I known…well, things would be very different now, wouldn’t they? But I hope you realize, although I may have been operating under faulty information, incorrect assumptions, I had your best interests at heart all the time. I wanted you to remember what had happened to you. I encouraged you to discover the real culprit for those murders. I just didn’t realize…well. There we are.”

He can’t look Will in the eye any more. He takes another, even larger, gulp of scotch.

Will says, in a strange flat voice, “How many times have you drunk that scotch with him?”

And Chilton chokes on it. Thrusts the glass down as if having just been informed it’s poisoned.

“I didn’t know!” he croaks. “How could I have known? No one knew! No one except you. I may have felt…when I first met him…there was something *not right* about him. If I am being honest, he sometimes frightened me. He may have…pushed me…into doing some things, the ethics of which I wasn’t altogether comfortable with. He has a way about him—a persuasive force—well, you must know. I did what I did because I was afraid of what might happen if I refused him.”

Will has had enough. “Do you have a legal right to keep me here?”

Chilton blinks at him. “What do you mean?”

“As of right now, am I still a patient at this hospital?”

“Well, I’m still waiting on a few phone calls, but no—”

Will is already up and leaving the room.

“Will!” Chilton cries, but he doesn’t prevent him from going.

Barney is waiting for him in the hallway.

“Which way’s the exit?” Will asks, a little brusquely.

“You escaping?”

“Will you try to stop me?”

“No,” says Barney calmly. “But you don’t want to walk out the front door. There’s a lot of news people camped there.”

Will stops in his tracks. He hadn’t thought of that.

“So it’s a good thing you’ve got a ride.” Barney angles his head. Only now does Will notice Jack, standing near a window, silhouetted so dramatically by the afternoon light that Will cannot see the expression on his face.

They look at each other for a long moment.

“Jack,” says Will, almost hesitantly.

Jack can only nod at him. Too much to say. Instead he talks to Barney. “Thank you. Let’s get him out of here.”

As the three of them start walking up the hallway, Chilton throws open the door of his office. “Wait!” he cries. “You can’t just *take* him! Agent Crawford, there are matters we have to discuss—”

“Not now,” Jack snaps. “But we’re gonna have a long talk later, that’s a promise. Come on,” he says to Will, and they keep walking, leaving Chilton trembling feebly in their wake.

Barney leads them through the employee locker room and out a side door into the parking garage, where Jack’s car is waiting. Barney hands Will his jacket and his glasses. Meanwhile Jack opens the passenger door and retrieves an evidence bag from the front seat. Within it are Will’s wallet, keys, pocketknife, phone, and his bottle of aspirin. The only thing missing is his gun.

“You better take this, too.” Jack hands him a Ravens cap. Will looks at it questioningly.

“There are photographers out there.” Jack’s mouth has gone thin.

Will puts on the cap. He checks the expiration date on the aspirin before popping two of them into his mouth.

Then he turns to Barney, who is looking at him with those vast and unassuming eyes. “I don’t know how to thank you,” Will whispers.

Barney shrugs. “Just keep on doing what you do. That’s enough for me.”

Will says nothing to this. Barney may not realize it, but he’s asking for a lot.

“We better go,” says Jack.

Barney reaches out and grasps Will’s cold hand. “Take care of yourself now.”

Will nods shakily. Something comes over him all of a sudden—a little of the numbness falls away—and before he can stop himself he takes a step towards Barney. Barney understands. He hugs him tightly.

“You’re gonna be ok,” he says into Will’s ear. Will isn’t sure if it’s a declaration or a question. If it’s a question, then Will doesn’t answer it.

After a moment he draws away; he can feel Jack’s eyes on his back. Barney gives him one last reassuring nod before Will throws himself into the passenger seat and slams the door. Jack starts the engine and swings the car around, Barney receding into the distance as they leave the garage.

Jack puts his hand on Will's shoulder, but it isn't for comfort. They've reached the barrier near the hospital's front steps where the journalists have massed. Jack pushes Will down until he is doubled over in his seat, and they pass the line of photographers without attracting more than a few flashes. This is Will's first taste of the outside world he thought he'd missed—staring at Jack's car floor, knees digging into his chest, overwhelmed with the feeling of being in a fishbowl. Even when they've driven past the press, Will doesn't sit up completely. He doesn't look out the window at the sky, or at the sloping grass, or at the bright autumn leaves. He just stares at the dashboard. The sense of unreality is still on him. This could be a dream, and he might wake up in his cell at any second.

When they're safely on the highway, Jack clears his throat. "So where am I taking you?"

Will says nothing.

"I'll take you anywhere you want to go," says Jack, firmly now.

"Don't you have anything better to do than be my driver?"

"No."

"What if I want to go to Disneyland?"

Jack looks at him out of the sides of his eyes. "You want to go to Disneyland? I'll take you to Disneyland."

"You know where I want to go."

Jack doesn't deny it. "If you want to go home first—or if you want to go to Georgetown and pick up the dogs—"

"I don't," says Will. "Not yet."

"Will, you should at least consider stopping somewhere, catching your breath, getting something to eat—"

"Have you been doing a lot of *eating* lately, Jack?" A bite of real malice in Will's voice.

This has the intended effect of shutting Jack down completely. Will notices how tightly he's gripping the steering wheel, the sheen of sweat across his brow.

"Then you better keep the hat on," Jack tells him, tersely.

The drive isn't long. Jack takes two calls on the way, one from the DOJ and one from the US Marshals, and Will can tell that neither is good news. But they don't talk to each other about these phone calls, or about anything else. At one point, while they're at a stoplight, Jack

retrieves his own little bottle out of the glove compartment and pops an antacid tablet in his mouth.

Soon they're pulling up to the police barricade. The block has been locked off at both ends, with news vans and bystanders bottlenecking around the tape. At least a hundred people have gathered there, all of them craning their necks for a glimpse of the cannibal's house.

This time there are a lot of flashes, until the whole world is strobing before Will's eyes. Jack's hand on his shoulder again. Will puts on his glasses with shaking fingers and slumps down, the cap low over his face, but he knows his photo is being taken regardless. He can feel the morbid curiosity of the crowd, the predatory excitement of the journalists; it pulses against him in feverish waves and he wishes he could take another shower.

The police wave Jack through the barricade. He pulls up right into the driveway and calls over to the FBI agents who are posted by the front door. "Let's get him inside. Quickly now."

They all but bundle Will out of the car, trying to screen him from the crowd as they run together up the steps, the shouting and flashes pursuing them into the house. The door closes behind Will and he is so keyed up that it actually takes him a moment to register that he is standing inside Hannibal Lecter's darkened foyer.

Immediately he removes the hat, as if he has just entered a church. Jack looks at him questioningly, but before he can say anything, an FBI agent with the complexion of cottage cheese runs past them and vomits into the hall bathroom sink.

"Jesus, Watkins!" Jack backs away.

"I'm sorry, sir!" the agent croaks. "So sorry!"

"You understand you're contaminating a crime scene?" Jack shakes his head with disappointment. "Fourth today who's done that." He hands Will some latex gloves out of his pocket. "I'm guessing you're not gonna have that problem."

"No," says Will.

He isn't looking at Jack or at the sick agent. He is taking in the house—or rather the house is entering into him; its overpowering atmosphere seeps past his barriers so quickly it is terrifying. He hasn't been inside this house in eight months, but he is as comfortable here as if he has lived nowhere else. Granted, the house feels less familiar to him now, for it has been altered by this incursion of its borders. So many people crawling over it like ants, with no regard for the sacrosanctity of the space. These crass invaders, they don't understand where it is they tread. Contaminating—yes, that is what they are doing. Making impure what was once pure. Someone ought to stop them.

Will shivers.

He knows Jack is watching him. He knows that Hannibal's territoriality has appeared on his face for Jack to see, if Jack knows how to look. And maybe Jack does know how, or else he's learning fast, because his voice is very gentle as he asks:

“Are you sure you want to be here?”

Will answers by snapping on the gloves and stepping further into the house. Jack follows him at a cautious distance.

Will stops at the study, which is full of people. He sees the bodies of Rutgers and Rezchek, who had the unlucky distinction of being assigned as Hannibal Lecter’s protective detail. Beverly is crouched over one of the agent’s bodies, but when she sees Will she leaps to her feet. Before Will fully understands what is happening, she crosses the room and hooks her uninjured arm around his neck.

He doesn’t exactly hug her back, but he’s all right with this. The house’s grip on him loosens as Beverly’s tightens.

“Hi Bev,” he whispers.

“Do you know how long I’ve been wanting to do this?” she says, into his shoulder. “For months and months.”

Over her shoulder he sees that everyone on the crime scene is staring at him. Stunned silence. But Zeller and Price recover themselves enough to shuffle over and stand behind Beverly expectantly, who releases Will with one last squeeze.

“Look who’s here,” she says to Price and Zeller, pulling Will closer to them.

“Will,” says Price, somberly, extending a hand. Will shakes it, because he sees no other way out of this interaction.

After Price comes Zeller. He shakes Will’s hand, too, very forcefully. “Good to have you back,” he mutters.

Will is very aware of the fact that the last time Price and Zeller saw him, he was tearing out a chunk of Hannibal Lecter’s face with his teeth. He is also aware of the way the other people in the room are looking at him; he knows they are feeling an obligation to come over and shake his hand, too. He’s about to end up in some twisted version of a receiving line in the middle of this crime scene.

So he clears his throat, looks somewhere in the vicinity of Price and Zeller, and says: “I’m here to see the bodies.”

The two agents blink at the awkward frankness of this statement.

“Yeah, of course,” says Zeller, who is now looking a little questioningly at Jack.

“You want me to clear the room?” Jack asks Will.

“Won’t be necessary.”

Will barely has to look at the agents to know their deaths were swift and perfunctory. Rezchek is lying near the window, face down. Hannibal took him completely by surprise.

Meanwhile Rutgers is splayed near the entryway, a couple feet from where Will is standing. Rezchek made a noise when he fell, and when Rutgers came to check on his fellow agent, Hannibal stepped out from behind the bust of Marcus Aurelius and twisted Rutger's neck almost all the way around.

Will crouches by Rutgers for a moment. He says, "It took him only seconds. He knew exactly how best to kill them. From the moment they were assigned to him, he started watching them, knowing he might be called upon to do this. Quick, necessary deaths. Minimal fuss."

Zeller and Price are staring. Beverly looks upset. Jack says, in a quiet voice:

"He looted them. Took their guns, their identification, cuffs, keys, car."

Will knows Jack is leading him into dangerous territory. He proceeds with caution.

"Found the car yet?"

"In Ferndale," answers Beverly, hesitation in her voice. She understands where this is headed, too, and she disapproves.

"About a mile from Baltimore airport," says Jack.

Will can hear the question in Jack's voice. He chooses not to answer it. Just climbs back to his feet. "I'd like to see the kitchen now."

Instantly Jack's hand is on his elbow. "Wait a second."

Will shakes his head, tries to pull away.

"No," says Jack, tightening his hold. "I need you to think hard about this first."

Will says nothing. If he feels anything of his own right now, it is dim annoyance.

"You could just let me take your statement." Jack's voice is gentle. "We could do it at my office. No reason it has to be here. Nobody's asking you to be here. Nobody's asking you to reconstruct."

Will looks at Jack flatly. Jack doesn't realize Will has already reconstructed the murder, that he was reconstructing it even as it happened. Jack is trying to warn Will about an avalanche that has already smothered him.

"Why did you drive me here," he asks Jack, in a deadly voice, "if not for me to reconstruct?"

"I drove you here because you asked me to." Jack looks extremely grave. "And I'm beginning to wish I hadn't listened."

But he sees by the look on Will's face that this conversation is pointless. He releases Will's arm and turns to his team. "Go clear the room."

Beverly does as he says, with palpable reluctance.

Will takes off his glasses before walking into the kitchen alone, although with every step he can sense Jack's eyes on his back. Jack is struggling with this decision, and with the decisions he has still to make. Will feels no such sense of internal strife. At this moment the numbness is on him so powerfully he is barely aware of anything inside himself. There isn't much there to be aware of. He is hollowed out, an empty vessel, ready to be filled up by something other than himself.

What he sees first are the glasses on the countertop. Hannibal's is empty, a bloody handprint wrapping all the way around it. Alana's glass is tipped over. Only a little stripe of dark beer remains inside; the rest is on the floor, mingled with blood.

Will's glass is untouched, full of golden champagne gone flat with the passing hours.

Will stares at the glasses for a very long time. They look like the sad remainders of a wild party he has been unfortunate to miss.

There's also a six-inch straight boning knife on the counter. Coated with blood.

The kitchen island lies between him and Alana's body, but he can see her legs and feet stretched out on the floor. One of her shoes has fallen off.

The forensics unit has finished here, probably hours ago. They should have taken her away already, transported her to the morgue at Quantico. Laid her out on a metal slab for a pathologist to perform an autopsy. Jack has delayed them. No matter what Jack might say to the contrary, he knew to wait for Will. He knew what Will would need to do.

But Will doesn't go to her. Not yet. He keeps to the other side of the island, as he heads for the wine cooler with its door propped open.

He pushes past the plastic sheeting, breathes in the abattoir smell. He observes without expression the ugly truth of Hannibal's lifestyle. The corpses are arranged in order of freshness. Hannibal is nothing if not organized. Will waits for the gruesomeness to penetrate him utterly, and then he walks the rows of meat, cataloguing his inventory. He recognizes Miriam Lass, mottle-skinned, all of her limbs sawn off. He finds Abigail, who is missing half her face, and Will cards his fingers through her hair. He looks for Bedelia du Maurier amongst the dead, but he cannot find her. That disturbs him a little.

He does one circuit of the room. Then he steps over to the light switch. Turns it off. Stands in the dark space with his eyes closed, breathing it all in, breathing it all out. When he turns the light back on, he allows himself to become Alana for a moment, Alana seeing this place for the first time. He quakes with her horror, her sense of contamination and collusion, but he also feels her bravery, and that steadies him. He has the strength now to come back out of Hannibal's secret room, to confront what's waiting for him on the kitchen floor.

He steps around the island and looks down at her, lying there on her back in a lake of blood. With one arm she is reaching for her phone, still sitting on the floor next to her. Her face is

angled towards the phone, her hair snaking out mermaidlike across the kitchen tiles beneath her.

He skirts the perimeter of blood. He does not reconstruct the crime, but he feels its echoes. Abandonment. Disappointment. Nostalgia. Tenderness. Despair. Hannibal's feelings, a tangled knot of them, hanging above Alana's body like smoke after fireworks. She believed Will in the end. Will, not him. He had spun her such a profound illusion, an illusion in which he would have been content to live forever, but she had rejected it. She had rejected him.

Tears roll down Will's cheeks. Not his own. He doesn't wipe them away.

It is a party. Was a party. His whole life inside this house. An artfully arranged, carefully orchestrated party. Full of lights and music, beauty and perfume. But now the party is over. This is all that's left.

He is aware of some measure of his control slipping away. The sense of unreality is disappearing, the numbness receding. His own feelings resurface, mixing with Hannibal's, and the two sets of emotions are so alike that they serve only to amplify each other, a harmony of terrible pain. He is not about to wake up in his cell in the Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane. He is here, really here, looking down at Alana on the floor, Alana who is dead, Alana whom he killed, Alana who breathed her last wishing she could hold his hand.

Will slides to the floor. He lies down on the other side of Alana's phone, just beyond the lake of blood, the kitchen tiles chilling the skin of his stomach. He turns his head and looks at her; their eyes are on a level. Hers are pale blue, clouded over. He reaches out and lays his gloved fingers into the cradle of her cold hand, the hand she was using to reach for the phone, to reach for him. As the tiles leech the heat out of his body, he lies there looking at her, holding her hand, being himself, being Hannibal, and this is how Jack finds him some indeterminate amount of time later, when Jack finally comes into the kitchen to check if he's all right.

Jack pulls him to his feet without a word, but his expression speaks volumes.

"Sorry," says Will. "I'm fine. I'm ok."

"Come on. We're going back to Quantico."

"No."

"Will—"

"I am fine," Will says curtly. He goes back around to the counter and braces himself against it. He breathes out, and his own emotions disappear in an instant, expelled from his body. He's numb again, emptied. He looks back up at Jack expressionlessly.

"You can ask me your questions now."

Jack is trying and failing not to stare at him in horror.

"Ask them," says Will, a note of command in his voice.

And against his better judgment, Jack obeys. “The glasses,” he says.

Will’s answer is immediate, even though the words are carefully chosen. “He was savoring the moment. Commemorating. He’d had the champagne picked out for years and years. He liked having it there. Liked looking at it. His *memento mori.* A reminder that all of this could pass away at any second, this kingdom he built for himself on the slope of a volcano.”

And oh, Jack is really staring now.

“Next question,” Will prompts him.

Jack pulls himself together as best he can. “Why three glasses?”

“Too easy.” Will points. “That one is mine. Next?”

“Why did he pour you a glass?”

“Because I was a part of this, same as him, same as her.” Will is feeling impatient; why is it so hard for Jack to understand all of this? “I was there.”

“You weren’t there, Will,” says Jack, quietly.

“I may as well have been.” Will looks at his glass full of flat champagne and is suddenly possessed with the irrational desire to drink it, as if this will somehow prove Jack wrong. He stops himself by fixing one of the kitchen towels, which is folded unevenly. Jack watches him do this and his eyes narrow.

Will ignores Jack’s look. “Next question.”

“You were on the phone. Were you talking to her, or to him?”

“Her first, then him. He put me on speaker. I heard everything.”

Jack takes this in. “Then why—”

Will doesn’t wait for him to finish. “He put it there. After he’d finished. He put the phone down next to her.”

Jack looks horrified. “So you could listen to her die?”

Will shakes his head. “It was for her to hear me. It was a kindness.”

Something loosens in Jack’s face. “That’s not kindness. That’s cruelty.”

Will shrugs. “It’s the same impulse with him.”

Jack can’t speak for a long moment. When he does, his voice is as grave as death:

“Why did he do it? Why did he kill her?”

Now they both stare down at Alana on the floor.

“How could he do that to her?” says Jack, and his questions seem to be drifting towards the rhetorical.

“She exposed his secret,” Will replies, in a colorless voice. “He saw that as a betrayal. Her betrayal. And mine, because I helped her to do it.”

“He’s the one who betrayed you both.”

“He doesn’t see it that way.”

“Well, he should.” Jack’s voice is shaking. “I keep coming up against a wall here, Will. I just keep forgetting. I turn around to ask him a question, to get his opinion on something. But he isn’t here. He was *never* here. That person I thought I was talking to, that person doesn’t exist.”

“All his lies held some measure of truth.” Will is looking very hard at Jack now, swallowing Jack’s own sense of betrayal in bitter gulps. “That’s why they were so effective.”

Jack can’t hear this right now. “He was mocking us the whole time. Laughing at us. Watching us tie ourselves in knots. He didn’t care about us. About *her*.”

“He did care,” Will says. “This is the result of him caring.”

“You’re really telling me this was a crime of passion?”

Will weighs this in his mind. “Yes. A crime of passion. Feeling got the better of him. He regrets submitting to it now.”

Jack’s brow is furrowed in incomprehension. “He doesn’t feel regret or remorse. He’s a psychopath.”

“He’s not a psychopath.”

A bark of disbelief from Jack.

“He’s not,” Will says, nothing but calm insistence in his voice. “There isn’t a word for what he is.”

Silence again. Jack is shaking his head slowly; it’s hard to tell whether he’s in disagreement with Will or in denial of this entire situation.

“None of us knew him,” Jack says slowly. “All this time and none of us knew a thing about Lecter. Who he really was.”

Will notes Jack’s switch to Hannibal’s last name with an echo of amusement.

“But you knew him,” continues Jack. “Didn’t you.”

Will says nothing. He doesn’t have to. And though Jack is doing everything in his power to hide it, Will still sees the barest glint of something mercenary in his expression. But the glint

disappears a moment later.

“I want you to know,” Jack says heavily, “that I did send a team. As soon as I was off the phone with you. They arrived here three minutes after Baltimore PD.”

“She was dead by then,” says Will.

“I know.”

They both stare down at Alana again. Neither of them can go on. Jack pulls the pill bottle out of his pocket, and takes another antacid.

Jack allows the crime scene team back into the kitchen. The techs finally take Alana away; Will averts his eyes, but he sees it anyway. The finality of the zipper screeching up the body bag almost overrides his self-control again, but he holds on. Meanwhile Jack hovers over Will, a not-so-subtle hint for Will to leave the room. But Will stays. He leans against the sink as Price dusts the table for fingerprints and Beverly and Zeller unload the refrigerator into evidence boxes packed with ice. Will doesn’t watch them work. He is alternating between biting what’s left of his fingernails and staring up at the ceiling. He sees a spider crawling there, slowly, no web in sight. Unfazed by the horrors below. Distantly he wonders where it’s going.

“Looks like some kind of custard,” says Beverly, peeking into a glass bowl.

“That can’t be people,” says Zeller.

“Could be people.” Beverly takes a sample.

Zeller pries off a Tupperware lid. “Pasta,” he says, sniffing at it.

“In meat sauce,” says Beverly.

Zeller puts it in the evidence box.

One of the forensic techs comes out of the secret room looking very green, and excuses herself. They watch her go.

Meanwhile Zeller lifts out of the freezer a vacuum-sealed bag full of amorphous red gunk. “Now this—this is definitely people.”

Jack hurriedly shakes out another antacid tablet and pops it.

“Take the whole fridge,” says Will, quietly. He is not looking at them, still observing the progress of the spider across the ceiling. “Take everything.”

Beverly looks at him. “What? Even the orange juice?”

“Even the orange juice,” Will echoes.

“You think he put human remains in the *orange juice*?” Zeller asks.

“Yes,” says Will. “It’s in everything.”

He looks down now, chews on the ragged edge of his thumb. His nowhere stare sweeps over the room and he notices that the cutting board has been knocked slightly askew. He nudges it so it is parallel to the counter again, and as he does this, he is very aware of Jack’s eyes following him, charting his behavior, recognizing it.

Will wanders aimlessly around the house, Jack following him all the time. He stops in the dining room and sees that the hidden document safe, the one behind the painting of the swan, has been cracked open. The safe is empty; not even a scrap of paper remains.

“It was like that when we got here,” says Jack.

Will nods.

He goes upstairs and explores these rooms he has only seen in picture form. Hannibal’s private spaces. His presence is powerful up here. Even Jack can feel it; he pops another antacid. Will suspects that everyone here has some latent awareness of Hannibal. He infused his domain with so much of himself—his eye, his taste, his touch. Hannibal oozing from the walls, Hannibal gleaming in the lights, Hannibal wafting off the upholstery, infectious as a plague. It’s putting everyone on edge, the early rumblings of collective hysteria. More people get sick: a junior agent vomits in the bushes out front in full view of the news crews. A photographer has an asthma attack in the home office. Someone drops a bottle of ethanol on the floor of the dining room. Price and Zeller’s snipes go from playful to not-so-playful. Beverly lapses into silence.

If Will is affected by this madness, he doesn’t show it. He navigates the haunted spaces without reaction. Jack watches him like Will is a bloodhound being presented with scent after scent. But Jack doesn’t ask him any more questions. Jack is waiting for his moment.

While Jack takes another phone call from the Marshals, Will wanders back to the kitchen, because at this point his mind is completely disconnected from his body, and his body is magnetized by the kitchen. He steps into the room—

—and sees Hannibal standing there, knife loose in his hand, blood streaming off the blade. Hannibal turns and looks right at Will, a question in his shadowed eyes.

All of Will’s control is gone in a blink. His emotions thrum. His heart pounds. He slaps a hand over his mouth before he can scream. But he must have made a noise anyway, because Price appears at his side, looking concerned.

“You ok?” he asks.

Hannibal is staring at Will. He slowly tilts his head, as if in sympathy.

Will shakes and sweats. “Do you see him?” he asks Price, who is goggling at him.

“Um…” Price reluctantly follows Will’s gaze. “I don’t see him. No.”

Will squeezes his eyes shut. When he opens them, Hannibal is gone. Which is somehow worse.

“Oh God,” he says, rubbing his face. He very badly wants to perform some act of violence on his brain.

“You should sit down,” says Price. “Head between your knees.”

“I’m going to get some air,” says Will, voicelessly, and Price is so afraid of him that he lets him go without protest. Will walks back into the dining room, staggers out through the sliding door into the backyard. He doubles over and stares unseeingly into the grass. His body is so full of Hannibal right now that it might at any moment detonate.

He hears low voices talking together on the other side of the hedge.

“You’re the only one here who doesn’t have to feel that way,” Zeller is saying. “You’re probably going to get a commendation out of this.”

“I didn’t do anything,” says Beverly, voice tight. “And don’t tell me I’m being modest, Brian; I literally did not do anything here. I went to the wrong place. My actions had zero positive impact.”

“You believed him, though.”

“Yeah,” she sighs. “I believed him.”

“He shouldn’t be here. Someone needs to tell Jack, and that someone really should be you. You’re the only one with any moral high ground right now.”

“Jack isn’t gonna listen to me.”

“Come on, Bev. Will is not all there. I know I’ve been saying that ever since I met him, but now it’s just… Jesus.”

“You wouldn’t be all there either,” says Beverly, “if you’d been through what he’s been through.”

Zeller does not respond to that. After a moment, he says: “You think he can catch him?”

“I don’t know.” A new sharpness in Beverly’s voice. “Jack thinks so.”

“Yeah,” says Zeller, voice rising, “I know Jack thinks so. Jack thinks he can unleash Will like a Lecter-seeking missile. But I don’t think Jack’s thinking all that clearly himself here. If he

goes through with this, he's gonna end up sending Will right back to the mental hospital, and he should probably send himself there while he's at it."

"God," moans Beverly, "please just do me a favor and shut up."

A moment of silence. "I'm sorry," says Zeller.

"No, you're not," mutters Beverly. And then, with a touch of fondness: "You're such an asshole."

"You'll talk to Jack?"

"I'll think about it."

Zeller goes back into the house, but Beverly stays behind. After a moment, Will hears the soft sniffs of crying. He absorbs these sounds of Beverly's distress for a solid minute before stepping out from behind the hedge.

She sees him, sees his face. "Oh fuck," she says. "How much of that did you hear?"

"Lecter-seeking missile?"

"Fuck," says Beverly, covering her face.

"It's nothing I didn't already know."

Will goes over to the stoop where she is sitting and drops down next to her.

"You're right about Jack," he says. "You're not going to be able to convince him."

"Can I convince you?" she asks, through her fingers.

Will says nothing. He wishes she wouldn't try.

"You have a choice here. You know that, right?"

Will still says nothing.

"You've been doing nothing but investigating him for *months*. You've done your part. You're allowed to stop now. No matter what Jack tells you, you are allowed to stop."

Will just looks at her.

"Please, Will. Let some good come out of all of this. Go off somewhere. Have a life."

Now he is looking at her with the full force of his power. He is seeing into her. And she can feel it, because the words dry up in her throat.

"You don't have to blame yourself for anything that happened," he tells her, after a long moment. "Or for anything that might be about to happen now."

She just stares at him, open-mouthed, as if he has slapped her.

“It wasn’t your fault, Beverly. You did your best. You did amazing.”

As she looks at him, her eyes fill up with tears again. “I put Rutgers and Rezchek on him,” she says. “*I gave her the key*.”

Will shakes his head. “Only because I asked you to.”

Beverly wipes her nose. “I thought she was going to rat us out. I didn’t realize…”

“There was nothing you could have done.” Will’s voice is steady. “Don’t blame yourself for what he did. You were not responsible.”

“Ok,” she whispers. “Ok. But, Will—” And suddenly she is looking at him with bright, beseeching eyes. “*Neither were you*.”

Will says nothing. He is thinking of what he just saw in the kitchen, the dripping knife, the question in Hannibal’s eyes.

“He wants you to feel complicit,” says Beverly. “That’s why he did all of that with the champagne and the phone. That’s his game here, Will. I know you see it. But you don’t have to play this time. Please promise me you won’t.”

A long moment of silence. She is breathing heavily. He barely breathes at all.

“Maybe I won’t,” he finally says.

“Really?” Her voice is high, like a child’s.

“Really,” he says.

They sit in silence after this, looking out at Hannibal Lecter’s manicured garden.

When Will goes back inside the house, he finds Jack, who has clearly been looking all over for him in barely restrained panic.

“I’d like to go to his office now,” says Will, before Jack can berate him for disappearing.

Jack looks a little confused, but he nods. “I’ll drive you.”

It’s the same song-and-dance as before. The paparazzi mob the car as it pulls through the police barricade. Will takes deep breaths and hugs his knees. Jack swears to himself as he strangles the steering wheel.

It’s a five-minute drive to Hannibal’s office. The door is taped off, but thankfully there are no journalists in sight. The office isn’t as interesting to the media yet, as it isn’t the scene of a

murder—at least, not a recent one. Jack pulls up the tape and escorts Will inside.

There's no one here but a pair of police officers. The forensics unit has come and gone. They have begun the process of inventorying and confiscating Hannibal's possessions. His patient records have already vanished. Many of the books and art pieces, too. The curtains are pulled wide open, flooding the normally darkened space with brilliant light. The dark haze of fingerprint powder coats every surface, as if the room itself is slowly being erased from existence. Will wanders around the room. Nothing to see here; no scents to pick up. Hannibal is already evicted from this space. He stops in the very center of the room and gives it one last sweeping look; already he barely recognizes it, this historic site where his journey began, where Hannibal first peered into his mind and Will peered into his, even if at the time he didn't know what it was he beheld there.

Jack asks the officers to leave, but Jack himself remains behind. Will expected this. He knows it's time.

Jack takes a series of long slow breaths as he strides up to Hannibal's desk. He leans against its edge and crosses his arms over his chest. "You know I have more questions for you," he says.

Will nods noncommittally.

Jack clears his throat. "When you were talking to Lecter on the phone, did he say anything about where he was going?"

"No," says Will, quietly. He is looking at the two leather chairs, still in their rightful places.

"Did he give you any indication of where he might go? Where he might like to go? Something only you would pick up on?"

"No. Alana told me…as she died…that he was interested in Florence and Buenos Aires. But he never talked vacation plans with me."

"What did he talk about with you?"

"Murder," says Will. "Mostly."

Jack steels himself. "How well would you say you know him?"

"Well."

"Well enough to catch him?"

And there it is. The words hang in the empty space like a massing storm cloud.

Will shuts his eyes. "I don't know how to answer that question, Jack."

"It's a yes or no question, Will."

"No, it isn't."

Jack's brow slowly furrows. "Now," he says, "I know you're under no obligation to help me. I'm the one here who's under an obligation. I wish I could just leave you alone. I really do."

Will says nothing. He can feel the walls closing in.

"If the world were fair, I'd never ask you for anything again. But the world isn't fair. You know it. I know it. I have to ask you, Will. I'm sorry."

In a strangled voice, Will says, "I can't catch him for you, Jack."

A long beat of silence. Finally Jack nods with difficulty.

"Ok," he says, "Ok, I understand. I won't ask again. You need—well, you're gonna need a lot of time. That's fine. Don't worry about it."

But Will talks over these inanities, his voice growing stronger until it fills the room. "I can't catch him for you, because I don't believe he can be caught."

This stops Jack in his tracks. "Everyone can be caught, Will."

Will shakes his head. He whispers: "Not him."

"He can be caught the same way we catch any of them," Jack insists. "Through old-fashioned police work, through forensics and the careful application of behavioral science. That's our line of work, Will. You've gotta believe in that."

Will just keeps shaking his head.

Jack tries to get a handle on this conversation. "I know he's got a lot of advantages on us. He has a jump. He's highly intelligent. An incredible con artist. I know he probably had this whole thing worked out far in advance, and the parts he didn't work out for himself he learned from studying us. I know all that. But he can still be caught."

"I don't believe he can." Will has himself in such an iron grip that his words come out clipped, surgically precise. "I believe that every effort you make to apprehend him will fail, because they will all be based on the fallacy that he can be caught, and contained, and brought to justice for his crimes. He can't be 'brought to justice'. There is no such thing as justice as it pertains to him. If you manage to arrest him, to slap the handcuffs on him—if you get as far as putting him in a cell, putting him on trial—he will love it. He will love every minute of it."

"I've seen the way he lives," says Jack. "He's not gonna love prison."

"He will. He will learn to. He will treat it as a challenge, a new experience by which he might hone his talents. It's not a punishment for him. There are no punishments for him. Even if you killed him, Jack—and I know how much you want to—he'd still see it as a victory."

Jack is staring, more with sympathy than shock. Will knows he is beginning to lose control of himself; he can't stop his voice from shaking any longer.

Jack takes a step towards him. “I would understand if you didn’t want to help me because you’re angry with me for everything I’ve done. I would understand if you wanted to get as far away from all this ugliness as you could. But this—this isn’t you, Will. I know you don’t believe this. You believe in justice. You believe in what I do. In what we do.”

“I believe in what we do,” says Will, his voice thin as he struggles for control. “But I do not believe in the possibility of what we do ever meaning anything to him.” He sighs. “It is inadvisable for you to pursue him, Jack. You won’t like what you find.”

“You talk about Lecter like he isn’t human.”

Will almost laughs. “Oh, Hannibal is human. That’s what frightens me.”

“So you’re gonna walk away? Just like that? You’re gonna walk away and let him run free, because he frightens you?”

Will suddenly remembers Bedelia du Maurier, her body still unaccounted for. He remembers the words she spoke to him long ago, words of warning, words he didn’t understand at the time. He smiles to himself as he says, “He will run free whether I want him to or not.”

“Well, I can’t accept that,” says Jack, predictably.

Will shrugs. “Then you’re gonna live a long, hard life. Or a very short one, depending.”

“And what about you?” Jack asks. “What are you gonna do, while you let Hannibal Lecter go free?”

“I haven’t given any thought to it. Fix boat motors maybe. Go some place warm where the dogs can run. I don’t know.”

“You think you’re gonna be able to fix boat motors, knowing he’s out there somewhere?”

Will is looking at the floor. “I can try.”

“And what about Alana?” Jack asks, in a roughened voice. It hurts him, trotting her out like this, but he’s doing it regardless of the pain. “You say you don’t believe in justice where Lecter is concerned, but what about her? Doesn’t she deserve justice, Will? Doesn’t she deserve that much?”

“She does,” Will says, and he can feel his emotions really stirring now. “But I don't believe she's ever going to get it.”

Their pain has become a tangible force in the room. Will is beginning to shake. Meanwhile Jack rubs his face.

“Will, let me tell you something I believe,” he says. “I believe in *you*. I believe that after everything you’ve been through, the only thing that’s going to give your suffering any meaning is for you to catch the man responsible. And I believe that whatever denials you feel it’s on you to make, you *can* catch him. You have the ability to catch him. You always have. Hannibal Lecter knew it. Why do you think he targeted you? Why do you think he tried to

destroy you so relentlessly? Because he knew you had the power to catch him. Maybe you're the only person on this earth with the power to catch him. And I believe the only reason you are choosing not to use that power now is because you are afraid of it. That's what I believe."

Will has never heard his situation put into these terms before. He doesn't think Jack's interpretation of Hannibal's motives is accurate, and yet it stops him short. Tears spring to his eyes at Jack's unshakable belief in him. He doesn't know what to do with Jack's belief. It is a gift he doesn't want.

"I…I *am* afraid," he manages. "Jack, I *can't*."

They stand in silence. Will can't look at Jack. Finally Jack says, "You're confused. You're upset. I'll let you think it over. Give you some time to really know your mind."

"I know my mind," says Will, voicelessly.

"I don't think you do," says Jack, very gently. "I don't think you ever have. Think it over, please. I'll be right outside."

And he leaves the room, closing the door softly behind him.

Will stands alone in Hannibal Lecter's office.

The numbness is completely gone, and he cannot summon it back. Now he is left to deal with his own pain, and it is all consuming. He cannot think. He has looked into the wounded eyes of so many people today, all of them injured by what Hannibal has done. He drank their pain, thinking it would somehow help him to understand his own, to crystallize the pain and hone it into a weapon that might be used against Hannibal. But those efforts have failed him. Pain isn't a weapon he can wield against Hannibal. Pain only works against himself.

Is this freedom? Is it now? But if this is freedom, then why does he see the bars of his cell everywhere he looks?

He doesn't know what to do. He is trapped by terrible decisions, by the raging incoherency of his own rebellious mind. Everyone keeps trying to clear matters up for him; everyone has their opinion on what he should do next. But Will can't trust any of it. No one understands the situation the way he does. No one knows the real stakes. No one except Hannibal.

And Will slowly lifts his head. He sees the two chairs facing one another. One for the therapist, the other for the patient.

Of course.

The pendulum swings.

As he walks towards the chairs, the curtains pull shut by themselves. The light inside the office caramelizes and shadows crawl across the floor. The art shuttles back against the walls. With a hectic papery rustle the books fly across the room, swirling in great flocks above his head, their draft buffeting him as they re-shelve themselves all along the bookcases. The

signs of the investigation disappear: the lights, the tape, the powder. Everything pristine again. Everything as it was.

He sits down in his chair of old. His eyes are shut, his breathing slow and deep. In other circumstances he might doubt himself, but he has performed this magic trick once today already, without even meaning to. He is grateful now for that mishap. It has taught him of what he is capable.

He keeps his eyes shut. He waits.

“Difficult spot you find yourself in, Will.”

He opens his eyes. And there is Hannibal in all his glory, sitting across from Will as if no time has passed since their last therapy session. He appears as real and solid as Jack was a moment ago. Hannibal in his immaculate suit, his face in shadow, the tips of his polished shoes just catching the afternoon light. A note-perfect reproduction.

“Rock and a hard place,” Hannibal continues, placidly.

“My natural habitat,” Will says, matching his tone.

“You are at a crossroads,” says Hannibal, “and at the end of every path lies your destruction.”

Will cocks his head. “How do you figure?”

“If you submit to Jack and join the FBI in pursuing me, you are guaranteed to suffer terribly, perhaps at my hand, but more likely at your own. If you choose instead to remove yourself from my pursuit, you will wither away in some sad corner of the world alone.”

“Well,” says Will, “thanks for sugarcoating it. Which do I choose?”

“As your therapist I cannot resolve this dilemma for you. But I can give you the tools you need to make your decision with clarity and confidence.”

“Ok,” says Will. “I’m listening.”

The corner of Hannibal’s mouth darkens. When he speaks his voice is more gentle than normal. “Will, you have presented yourself with a false dilemma. There are options other than the ones you are considering.”

“Explain,” says Will.

“You told Jack you don’t believe I can be brought to justice. That justice would have no impact upon me, upon the way that I am.”

“Don’t try to argue with me about that.”

Hannibal smiles faintly. “I wasn’t planning to. But who is justice intended to impact, Will? The criminal? Or the people he has wronged? When you say you don’t believe I can be brought to justice, what you really mean is that even if I were apprehended, imprisoned, or

even executed, this outcome would not satisfy *you*. As my victim. The wrongs I committed against you would remain unaddressed. ”

“I am not your victim,” says Will, in a deadly voice.

Hannibal nods. “You don’t want to think of yourself as my victim. Which is your prerogative. But that is the reason why justice will not satisfy you. Tell me, Will. What will satisfy you?”

“Nothing,” whispers Will. “I can’t be satisfied.”

Hannibal tsks at him. “I don’t believe that’s true.”

“Then tell me how I might achieve satisfaction, Dr. Lecter.”

Hannibal leans forward, so that the light from the windows finally hits his face. “By becoming an instrument of justice yourself.”

Will almost laughs. “Oh, here we go.”

“Come after me,” says Hannibal. “Not with Jack. Not with all the king’s horses and all the king’s men. Come on your own, and avenge yourself upon me as you see fit.”

Will is staring at him. “But that’s what he *wants* me to do.”

If this Hannibal is offended by Will’s switch in pronouns, he doesn’t show it. “It’s what you want to do, too. Why deny yourself?”

“Because I know where that path leads,” says Will. “The same place as all the rest.”

“But it leads to your satisfaction, doesn’t it?”

Will shakes his head. “Mutually assured destruction.”

“And there’s something consoling in that, isn’t there?” Hannibal asks. “Destruction that is mutually assured.”

Will is silent for a long time, contemplating it. Hannibal watches him patiently. Finally Will says, in a quiet voice. “I could opt out. You don’t know. I might be able to make it work. Find a good place somewhere where I might be left alone. It’s not in your interests for me to make it work, which is why you’re so convinced I’d fail.”

“Opting out,” says Hannibal, “is the only option you cannot take.”

“I can,” says Will. “I might.”

Hannibal shakes his head.

“This isn’t good psychiatry, Dr. Lecter. You’re letting your personal bias get in the way of your advice.”

“I am not giving you advice, Will. I am stating facts. You cannot opt out. It is an option physically unavailable to you at the present moment.”

“What do you mean?”

Something is happening to Hannibal; the pattern on his suit is flickering, as if his image is losing resolution. “I simply will not let you,” he says.

Will stares. “You can’t stop me. You’re halfway around the world right now.”

“I will not let you,” Hannibal repeats.

His face is flickering now, too. And suddenly this Hannibal, the good doctor with his polite expression and relaxed composure, this tranquil version of Hannibal whom Will has conjured for himself, this version disappears, and in his place sits something else. Hannibal with his hair falling across his forehead, a spot of blood on his chin, a livid bite mark on his face, his clothes rumpled and gore-streaked. His eyes fathomless yet questioning. Hannibal as he was in that kitchen.

Will rears back in his seat, suddenly afraid. This projection is slipping out of his control.

But this monstrous vision is gone as quickly at it appeared. An instant later, the good doctor has returned, immaculate as always. He points his steepled fingers at Will, a very characteristic gesture.

“Will, I have a stake in your survival, as you must realize, so please listen carefully to what I am about to tell you. If you wish to survive what happens next, you are going to have to do something. Something you have always been hesitant to attempt. Are you listening, Will?”

“Of course I am,” Will whispers, his heart pounding.

“You believe you understand me, and you do. But there is still one aspect of me you haven’t allowed yourself to comprehend. Because you are afraid of it. And rightly so.”

Hannibal is flickering again. Back and forth between the monster and the man.

“Will,” he says. “You have to look through my eyes and see yourself. See yourself as I see you.”

Will is spellbound. With difficulty he whispers: “I don’t think I can do that.”

“You have to,” says Hannibal. Blood is dripping off him, saturating the carpet. “Or you will die.”

Chapter 25

Chapter Summary

Wolf. Trap.

Jack and Will chase the sunset back to Virginia. No signs of journalists or onlookers on the highway, but Will slumps in his seat anyway. He stares at the waning thread of orange light across the horizon, but occasionally his eyes flick to the side mirror, where he can see the reflection of the Animal Services van following behind them.

Jack doesn't try to talk to him; they have already said everything there is to say. But when they turn on to the exit for Wolf Trap, Jack can't help himself.

"There's still time, you know, for you to reconsider."

Will says nothing, but the lines of his mouth deepen.

Jack lifts his fingers off the steering wheel, a defensive gesture. "I don't want you doing anything you're unsure about."

"There's no certainty here, Jack. There never will be." Will's voice is quiet, purged of emotion, so distant it might be hailing from some other planet. He may be in this car for a few more minutes, but in spirit he has already left Jack far behind.

Jack's eyelids slip down over his hard eyes. He is unable to express the depth and intensity of his feelings—how responsible he feels for what is happening, how badly he wants Will to change his mind—but Jack doesn't have to express any of this, because Will experiences it along with him. It is so exhausting that as a defense mechanism Will shuts down the part of himself sensitive to Jack's feelings. Instead he devotes the bulk of his attention to watching as the last of the sunlight dissipates, the sky now the thick navy that precedes true night.

Jack rolls up the dirt driveway, fingers tight on the wheel. Beyond the trees there appears a familiar shape, huddled and square. Will's little house. Will has always felt as if his house exists in safe suspension, out of time; and this has remained true even in his absence, for the house looks just the same as when he left it. Even at this distance, it radiates quietude.

Jack stops the car, but keeps the engine running. The headlights are bright on the side of the farmhouse; the paint, slightly peeling, seems to glow. Jack and Will sit in silence, both of them looking at the house and thinking their separate thoughts, as the Animal Services van parks further up the drive.

As Will unbuckles his seatbelt, Jack looks over at him.

“I want to trust you,” he says.

Will sighs. “But you don’t.”

“Do you trust yourself?”

Will can’t answer that. He gets out of the car and slams the door. His shoes crunch on the hard earth as he walks towards the van. He nods to the driver and the handler in the front seat, and the handler gets out of the van and follows Will to the back. They open the doors and find the dogs shifting in their carriers, newly awoken and anxious for freedom. Will can understand the impulse.

He helps the handler get the dogs leashed and calm, but despite his efforts they remain a little wild. They sense something in him. Winston rubs his head against Will’s leg, a warm probing weight. But once they’re out of the van, the familiar smells of Will’s property serve to gentle the dogs a little. Will stands in the grass, with the two group leashes gripped loosely in his hands, and he shuts his eyes, letting the familiarity of this place envelop him too, lets it burrow deep inside of him until he’s filled to his limits. Home. Home, at last.

He hears Jack’s slow footsteps. He stops in front of Will, his shoulders hunched and his hands thrust in his pockets like an old gunslinger.

“So here we are,” Jack says.

A tide of powerful emotion rising up from underneath Jack’s façade.

“Here we are,” Will echoes.

Jack clears his throat. He needs to say his piece. “When I first wanted you back in the field, I promised Alana I’d look out for you. I told her that no matter what happened out there, I’d still cover you.”

Both of them pretend not to notice Jack’s voice shaking just a little.

“I know I broke that promise. I let her down. I let you down in every way. I threw you in his path, and then I left you there. On your own. With him.”

Will says nothing, but his hands tighten on the dogs’ leashes. There was a time when he would have welcomed apologies, when he would have been happy to listen to them repeated on a loop. But they are empty sounds to him now. Meaningless. He feels no anger, only the distant echo of something just shy of pity.

But he says, for Jack’s sake: “You didn’t know. You did what you could.”

“I left you on your own. I keep leaving you on your own.”

“But I’m not on my own.” Will’s voice is growing increasingly strange, a private joke thrumming underneath every word.

Jack hears it. The look of worry only intensifies on his strained face. He says: “You’re more alone right now than you are ever gonna be.”

Will looks right through him. “Goodbye, Jack. Good luck to you.”

Jack’s face falls. He whispers back: “Good luck to *you*, Will.”

He turns around with Will still watching him, and slowly, as if every step pains him, Jack walks back to his car. Even though the dogs are trying to pull away, Will stays where he is, his eyes on Jack’s profile as he drops into the front seat. He catches Jack giving him one final look, and Will raises a hand in farewell. Jack merely nods. He drives back into the night, the Animal Services van following behind him.

Now it is just Will, the dogs, the darkness, and the house. He takes a moment, gathering himself for his homecoming, as the night insects chitter out their symphony all around him. Then he leads the dogs up the porch steps, the old wood creaking as they go. The front door is sealed shut with a Virginia Police sticker. With his pocketknife Will slices through it. He thinks of a local town mayor, cutting a ribbon on a new building with a giant pair of scissors. It’s official now. Open for business. He unlocks the door and leads the pack across the threshold of his little house.

The comfortable air washes over them. Will can see the sleepy shadows of the furniture in the dark. So achingly familiar it wrenches a sigh out of him. He turns on his desk lamp so he can get a better look at the living room.

And that is when he sees Hannibal in the corner near the fireplace. Hannibal Lecter. Sitting in Will’s house. In Will’s chair. Watching Will with hooded eyes. Waiting for him.

Everything inside of Will stops so suddenly that even his sense of self stutters out.

Hannibal doesn’t speak, doesn’t move. He could be another projection. But this Hannibal is neither the attentive psychiatrist nor the blood-encrusted specter. His hair is slicked back, his bite mark neatly bandaged, and he is wearing dark simple clothing, casual and nondescript.

He is also tapping the curved blade of what looks like a linoleum knife against his knee.

Of all the things that seem strange about this moment, the linoleum knife is what puzzles Will the most. An incongruous weapon. Where did it come from? Hannibal couldn’t have found it in Will’s house.

The dogs—their leashes now gripped tightly in Will’s fists—look at Hannibal with bright, unthreatened curiosity. It doesn’t seem odd to them that he should be here, sitting and waiting with a knife on his knee. An old friend, come to visit.

“You’re inside my house,” says Will.

Hannibal says nothing.

Will flexes the muscles in his mind experimentally, but this Hannibal does not disappear. Apparently Will doesn't have the power to erase him.

"You're inside my house," Will repeats, and this time he hears heartbreak in his own voice. His only sanctuary, the one bright spot in this terrible day, and Hannibal is there.

Hannibal remains silent.

"*Why* are you inside my house?" Will moans.

"I like your house," says Hannibal. His voice is hushed, almost meek.

And he has to be real, because even Will's imagination isn't this perverse.

Hannibal begins tapping the knife at a faster pace. "I often came here when you were institutionalized. On the days when I couldn't see you. This was the next best thing." He looks around with wondering eyes. "So much of yourself imbued into these shabby objects. They have a quiet eloquence now, these remnants. You have given them the power to speak."

Now Will is really staring. Hannibal's manner is more openly strange than he has ever seen it. No longer is he making the effort to appear even remotely human. Instead he bleeds out melancholy in great blue gouts. He obviously has not moved for hours; from this chair in Will's living room Hannibal has watched the sunset, and when the light failed, he sat in the dark, caressing his linoleum knife to anchor himself within his body, within this place.

Will looks at him and feels furious. Furious with Hannibal. Furious with the linoleum knife. Furious with the forces of creation that have given birth to this abomination of a moment in time.

He gesticulates wildly at his own front door: "*I want you out of my house!*"

Hannibal just blinks at him. "I didn't think you'd mind."

Which causes Will to almost scream with laughter, as the dogs huff and mill tighter around him. "You didn't think I'd mind!"

"It's not as if you were using it."

Will makes a loud noise: half incomprehension, half fury.

The side of the linoleum knife goes *click click click* against the sharp bone of Hannibal's kneecap. "You are startling the dogs," he says.

Will doesn't need a warning any stronger than that. He pulls himself together.

"I—I have to tie them up."

"I'll help you."

Hannibal gets up and Will recognizes the shirt he's wearing as one of Will's own. Sure. Why not. Hannibal keeps the linoleum knife in his left hand, gestures with his right for Will to follow him through to the back of the house. Will lets himself be beckoned, trailing Hannibal without a word. A few of the dogs pull ahead to sniff at him, and Hannibal greets them with the distant friendliness of an apex animal acknowledging lesser beasts.

Through the back door they step into the beautiful evening—Wolf Trap silent and still and stretching uninhabited all around them—and a twisted sense of domesticity falls over Will as he and Hannibal fasten the two group leashes to the latticework along the back porch. They calm the dogs as if they have done this together a hundred times before. Then Hannibal holds up a finger and goes back inside the house.

Will stands on the porch, waiting for Hannibal, as docile as the dogs. He doesn't consider plans of violence or escape. He doesn't send a message with his phone. He knows only too well what would happen to him if he pursued any of these avenues. Hannibal needs no better threat than what Will's own imagination can provide.

Hannibal returns to the porch with water for the dogs and they congregate enthusiastically around him to lap it up. Will and Hannibal watch them for a moment in companionable silence; then Hannibal motions with the linoleum knife for Will to lead him back into the kitchen.

Once inside, Will sits down at the kitchen table, which is set for two. Hannibal stands by the counter, looking at him. Hannibal's manner remains gentle, almost reticent, but then there is the linoleum knife, omnipresent in his left hand as if fused to his bones like a talon.

He asks, "When did you last eat?"

"No," says Will, voice suddenly firm.

"It was through a tube, wasn't it?"

"I won't eat anything you give me."

Hannibal smiles, very faintly. "You think I'm intending to poison you?"

Will gives him a look. "It's not poison I'm worried about."

"You needn't worry at all. I'm making eggs."

Hannibal opens the fridge and Will sees that he has stocked it with the bare necessities. He has been in Will's house all day, avoiding the airports, the roadblocks, the concentrated frenzy of his own manhunt, biding his time in peaceful little Wolf Trap, waiting for Will to be released from the hospital and return home.

Hannibal lines up eggs, vegetables, cream and herbs on the countertop.

"It was eggs the first time, wasn't it?" he asks—unnecessarily, as they both already recognize the connection.

“Eggs and sausage,” Will mutters, weighing the word ‘sausage’ with irony.

“No sausage this time,” says Hannibal. “We will have to make do.”

“I still won’t eat it.”

“You will.”

“Eat or be eaten?”

“If you like.”

Hannibal’s voice is indifferent, without inflection. Only now does he surrender the linoleum knife to the counter. He trades it for a chopping knife and gets to work on the vegetables.

“Who was it,” Will asks, “the first time?”

“You already know the answer to that.”

“Cassie Boyle.”

Hannibal nods.

“Why feed her to me?”

Hannibal shrugs as he chops. “I found it funny.”

Will lets this sink in. “But that wasn’t the only reason.”

“What was my reason then?” Hannibal asks, honestly curious.

“She was the first of yours I’d ever seen. My first real taste of you.”

Hannibal acknowledges this with a nod, still chopping away. “Did I make an impression?”

Will thinks of the stag prowling through his waking dreams. “More than you’ll ever know.”

“She was special to me for that reason.” Now Hannibal is breaking eggs. “I wanted to share her with you. A token of friendship.”

Will snorts, very gently, but doesn’t contradict. “So what’s this?” he asks, indicating what Hannibal is doing. “You’re feeling nostalgic?” A note of cruelty in his voice he doesn’t bother to disguise.

“I am in mourning,” says Hannibal, gently. “Same as you.”

“Not *exactly* the same.”

Hannibal doesn’t deign to respond to that, so Will keeps going.

“Maybe you are in mourning. But what you mourn is the loss of your possessions, your comfortable life of lavishness and luxury.”

The sizzle of eggs in the pan, the only sign of Hannibal’s patience fraying.

He says, “I haven’t the slightest feeling about the life I left behind. It was a dream I enjoyed the dreaming of. Now I am awake.”

Will remains dubious. “You won’t miss it?”

Hannibal looks up from his cooking and stares at Will with eyes slightly unfocused. “I will miss…the pretense, I suppose. The opportunity to live among them, to enjoy their company. Their trust.”

“Them…” says Will, with horrified amusement, as the hearty smell of the scramble fills the room.

“Them,” Hannibal affirms. He uses the pronoun with affection, not condescension.

He plates the eggs, carries both of them with one hand so that he can hold the linoleum knife with the other. He puts one plate in front of Will before sitting down across the table from him. They look at each other for a long moment, their meals steaming between them.

“Please eat,” says Hannibal, quietly.

Will shakes his head.

“Indulge me in this one thing.”

“Why should I indulge you in anything? I’m not sick. I’m not in prison. I have no incentive to play along.” Now Will eyes the linoleum knife openly. “Just get it over with. Stick that thing in me.”

Something tightens in Hannibal’s face. “I’d rather not do that.”

Will’s voice is grim. “Don’t pretend you didn’t come here to kill me.”

“I came here because I wanted to see you.”

“And you brought *that* with you because you thought you’d redo my floors while you were at it?”

Hannibal sighs. He puts the linoleum knife down next to his plate. “Eating before one’s guest is a cardinal sin according to the rules of etiquette. I hope you can forgive my lapse.”

With that, he picks up his fork and begins to eat. Will watches him in silence, not moving, hardly breathing so as to avoid the smell of the eggs. He lets thirty seconds go by. Then, without a word, Will picks up his plate and chucks it at the wall. It breaks with a crash; the eggs leave a smear on the wallpaper.

A few barks and whines from the dogs, startled by the noise.

But Hannibal doesn't recoil; the only evidence of his startlement is the heaviness of his swallow. He looks up at Will questioningly.

"Well, I don't *forgive you*," says Will, shaking hands now clutching the edge of the table. "What do you say to that?"

Hannibal's voice is so soft Will can hardly hear it. "Will, you're being rude."

"Oh, no," he drawls. "Am I?" And in a single motion, he stands, comes around the table, grabs Hannibal's plate out from under his raised fork, and hurls it at the wall too. "How about that? Was that rude?"

He stands there, staring down at Hannibal, panting with fury. Hannibal meanwhile sits there placidly, looking at the empty place where his meal was sitting a moment before. The linoleum knife is still lying on the table right in front of him.

"Well?" Will growls. "What are you waiting for?"

Slowly Hannibal rotates his head until he is looking at Will. "I miss her, too," he says, simply.

Will makes a high noise in his throat. In an instant he swoops down on Hannibal, grabs the linoleum knife with one hand and the back of Hannibal's hair with the other, and holds the blade up to the side of Hannibal's face, the point just touching the bandage over the bite mark.

Hannibal just keeps looking up at him, no change of expression.

"You *killed* her," Will hisses, pulling on Hannibal's hair so that his head tilts back.

Hannibal doesn't even blink. "Yes," he says. "But you killed her, too."

The knife trembles in Will's hand. He smiles a terrible smile. "No—no—you don't get to do that. You don't get to pass the blame."

"You're the one passing blame. We killed her together."

Will shakes his head over and over. "You want to share responsibility for what you are, for what you did. You love to share; you're so generous. You think you can feed your guilt to me the same way you fed me your crimes, but you can't, Hannibal. I won't let you. I am not responsible for you. I have never been responsible. You had a choice. I didn't. You chose to kill her. That was all you. You can't put this on me. I won't take it."

"You already have," Hannibal whispers.

Will can't speak, can't deny it. He would like to carve off Hannibal's face right now. He would like to carve it all the way off, see what's under there.

Hannibal's eyes are larger than normal, full of peculiar understanding. "It hurts," he says. "When death swings out of our control. Death should be on our terms, and on our terms only. Neither of us was in control at that moment, and poor Alana paid the price. But these are your terms now, Will. What are you going to do?"

"You're just going to sit there and let me kill you?"

"You would be within your rights to try." It's not exactly an answer.

Hannibal waits patiently as Will keeps the linoleum knife poised at the ridge of his cheekbone. And then, very gingerly, as if dealing with an animal liable to spook, Hannibal reaches up towards the knife. And as Will watches him do this, he makes a promise to himself that if Hannibal tries to take the knife from him, he will kill Hannibal without a second thought, he will pull the curved blade across his throat, opening him up from carotid to carotid, showering himself with Hannibal's blood, he can see it so clearly inside his mind that it may as well have already happened…

But Hannibal doesn't reach for the knife. Instead his fingers fix around the edge of his bandage, and with smooth and casual control he pulls it off, forcing the point of the knife away from his face as he does it, so that by the time the bite mark is fully exposed, the linoleum knife is three spare inches away from Hannibal's skin.

Then Hannibal drops his hands back down, folds them politely in his lap. "I prefer us face to face," he says, by way of explanation.

Will just stares. He doesn't bring the blade back up to Hannibal's face. He looks at the bite mark, a testament to his own loss of control, the livid evidence of the wild beast Will and Hannibal both know he can be, and before he can rationalize or even contemplate his actions, he has released Hannibal's hair. He drops his other hand until the knife is by his side.

"I'm not you, Hannibal," he says. "However much you might like me to be."

And he returns to his seat on the other side of the table, though he still clutches the linoleum knife in his right hand.

Despite the fact that Hannibal never once reacted to having a knife in his face, there is something incrementally more relaxed about him now that Will has sat back down.

"I never wanted you to be me, Will."

Will *tsks* dismissively.

Hannibal continues undeterred: "I never did. All I wanted was for you to be yourself."

Will's hand tightens on the knife handle. "I was always myself."

Hannibal shakes his head. "You were who you thought you had to be. Who your father taught you to be, and who men like Jack Crawford told you you had to continue being. You were only half alive when I met you. Shut down. Afraid to look at eyes. Afraid to look at anything. Mortally afraid to look at yourself."

“You think I’m not afraid any more?” Will asks, trying for a sneer and failing.

“You understand your fear better now. Which is why you rejected the FBI and sent Jack Crawford on his way.”

Will’s expression becomes instantly impassive. “What makes you think I rejected Jack?”

“You came home early, without your gun. And I was watching you when you talked with Jack in your driveway. He had the look of a man struggling under the weight of disappointment.”

Will shrugs. “It doesn’t really matter now, what I chose to do. You being here renders that decision pointless.”

Hannibal leans forward, elbows on the table. “Your decision matters. It matters to me. It pleases me that you refused Jack. If you had returned to the FBI, you would have consigned yourself to a life of exploitation and soulless labor. I have had plenty of opportunities to observe Uncle Jack and his band of loyal helpers; I can say with confidence that the FBI is a corrupt institution. Of course all human institutions tend towards corruption, but the FBI, in its grand ambitions, is particularly objectionable as institutions go. It reduces the complicated into a binary system of guilt and innocence. It reduces the vast spectrum of human behavior into the strict confines of a one-page profile that can be slipped into a folder and filed away in some forgotten drawer. ‘Behavioral science’—an oxymoron if ever I heard one. There is no science that can explain human behavior.”

“Says the psychiatrist,” Will mutters, a little feebly. He is overwhelmed.

Hannibal shrugs. “I worked with people. With minds. Not with files and forensics and algorithms. Certainly not within the law. It was my goal to help my patients understand themselves. To better themselves. Which brings me to my primary objection against the FBI. It reduces people. Good people. It mines their talents until they are bled dry, used up, destroyed. I never wanted that life for you, Will.”

Will favors him with a twisted smile. “Some things never change. You were always trying to convince me what I did was bad for me.”

“It was bad for you.”

“Not as bad as it was for *you*.”

“It was inconvenient, nothing more. It would have been inconvenient for me now, had you chosen to join my manhunt. I am gratified you decided against it. You have grown, Will. You perceive now what you were unwilling to perceive before you met me. The FBI is no place for you. If you go back there, you will never be free.”

“Free…” Will swallows hard.

“What will you do now?” Hannibal asks him, gently.

Will clamps his eyes shut. He becomes aware of how he is tapping the linoleum knife hard against his knee. “I don’t know,” he says. “Who cares? It’ll never happen now.”

“Retreat back to the crumbling wharves of Biloxi or Greenville? Tinker with your boat motors, just like in the good old days with dad?”

And Will is up again. He comes around the table, slams the linoleum knife down in front of Hannibal, and keeps going, stalking through the hallway back to the living room. “I don’t need this,” he shouts. “I don’t fucking need this. Do what you came here to do. I’m through talking to you.”

He walks blindly into the living room, the space half empty because so many of his things are still bagged for evidence. His breath is coming in injured gasps. His hands shake so badly that when he tries to turn on the floor lamp, it goes on and off and on again before he can make his hand release the chain. He throws himself down in the chair Hannibal was sitting in and buries his face in his hands.

He is aware of Hannibal coming into the living room after him, even though Hannibal is walking with soundless footsteps.

“You will die if you attempt to live that life,” Hannibal says, quietly.

Will says nothing. He doesn’t look up.

“It’s someone else’s life, Will. It always was. You cannot get by, living the life of the dead. The best parts of you will wither away from disuse and boredom. Any remaining shreds of spirit you possess you will have to anesthetize with whatever narcotic you have on hand. You can’t go back to that. There is no freedom for you there.”

Now Will looks up. Hannibal is standing in front of him, shoulders bowed like a supplicant, the effect only somewhat dampened by the linoleum knife in his hand.

“Freedom,” Will spits, his mouth twisted. “Hilarious, how much you love talking about my freedom. You, of all people, have no interest in me being free.”

“That’s all I’ve ever wanted for you,” says Hannibal.

Will laughs, high-pitched, hysterical. “You put me in a cell!”

“Yes.”

“And you don’t see a contradiction there?”

“No.”

They look at each other.

When Hannibal speaks next, his voice is shaking. “You needed to be removed from the world that was infecting you, oppressing you. You needed a safe place where you might see yourself anew. I gave you that.”

“Well,” says Will, voice shaking too, “I’m very grateful.”

“You should be. That place transformed you, Will. Under its relentless heat and terrible pressure you became something more than what you were; you went from plain graphite to purest diamond. Something hard and shining. You were at the mercy of your gifts before that hospital—now they are at your command, and how you use them. You are magnificent in ways I can never be. I am in awe. I have been in awe of you, Will, for many months now.”

As Hannibal speaks, he moves forward imperceptibly, slowly approaching Will in his chair.

“I never put you in prison. I set you free.”

Will looks at him, tries to speak past the hard lump in his throat. “I… don’t… feel… *free*.”

Hannibal, all sympathy, nods in understanding. “You still feel the call of the person you used to be. You perceive the distance between who you are now and who you were then and that distance terrifies you. The terror will fade, Will. I can help you.”

Will shakes his head.

“You can’t escape this,” Hannibal says. Now he is crouching right in front of Will, leveling the plane between them. “You can’t reverse a chemical reaction that is already underway. I have already established there is nowhere for you to go, nothing you can do. No life for you to return to. You can’t go home again, isn’t that the saying? You must go on, Will. Don’t squander the gift I’ve given you.”

“It’s not a gift,” Will says, tears in his eyes. “The only reason—the only reason I can’t go back to the FBI—can’t go back to boat motors—is because you’ve ruined me. You’ve ruined me for doing anything else.”

Hannibal looks pained. “I haven’t ruined you.”

“You have. You have.”

“Will—” Hannibal reaches for his arm.

“Don’t touch me!” He draws back. Pushes himself out of the chair and veers away from Hannibal, who slowly rises to his feet.

“You killed her,” Will says. “You ruined me. Paint it up in whatever beautiful images you want, but that’s what you’ve done. That’s what you always do. You don’t make people better. You destroy them. You are a monster. *A. Monster*.”

The words seem to echo in the little room. Hannibal looks very solemn.

“I’m not a monster, Will.”

And Will sobs out a laugh at the ceiling.

“‘Monster’ is a word people use for something they can't understand. But you understand me.”

“Well…” Will gives a bereft and helpless shrug. “I guess I’m a monster too.”

Hannibal is overcome; his lips pull downward, his eyes turn very bright. “You are not a monster.”

Tears are rolling down Will’s face. “From you that means less than nothing.”

“You could never be a monster. You have a purity that cannot be touched. Your imagination, your empathy, your bravery. More human than human. I admire that in you, Will. I admire you.”

“I don’t want your *admiration*.” Will laces this word with acid.

“Just as you don't want to admire me. But that doesn’t change the fact that you do.”

This is too much. “Why can’t you just *get out of my house*!?” Will sobs. “Either kill me or get out. I can’t listen any more. I can’t listen to this.”

“I didn’t come here to kill you,” says Hannibal.

And to illustrate, he tosses the linoleum knife away; it lands heavily on the hallway floor.

“I came here to take you with me.”

Will stares at him, dumbfounded, for what feels like hours. Then he says: “You. Are. Crazy.”

“And so are you,” says Hannibal, with dignity. “Please consider my offer. It is the only path available to you that doesn’t end in your destruction.”

Will’s eyes are wide, uncomprehending. “You murdered Alana. You murdered Abigail. You’ve done nothing but torment me since we met. And now you think I’m just gonna say, ‘what the hell!’ and go off on the lam with you?”

“Yes,” says Hannibal.

“You’ve got it bad.”

The faintest smile. “I don’t deny it.”

“I won’t go.”

“You want to,” says Hannibal. “It’s the only way you can be free. Free of Jack, free of your ghosts. Stay behind and you will rot away. I am giving you life, Will. Don’t choose death just to spite me.”

“I like spiting you,” says Will. Then, “Where would we go?”

“Anywhere. Everywhere. I prefer a place with opera, where Châteauneuf-du-Pape is plentiful, but I am amenable if you have other ideas.”

Will’s eyes have narrowed. “Would you make me kill?”

“I wouldn’t make you do anything you didn’t already want to do.”

“Yeah,” says Will, with a twisted smile, “that’s what you always say.”

Hannibal twitches his shoulders, a minute shrug. “Come with me.”

Will is watching him closely. “You have been so lonely,” he says, “for so long.”

“So have you.”

“And you think this will help?”

“Yes,” says Hannibal, firmly.

“And if I say no, what happens then?”

Hannibal’s eyes twitch to the floor of the hallway. “It doesn’t bear thinking about.”

Will nods to himself, but says nothing. Hannibal inches closer to him.

“Please, Will. Come away with me. Let me save you.”

“You think I need saving?” Will whispers, holding his ground even as Hannibal encroaches on his space.

“For now you do,” says Hannibal. “But not for long.”

They are very close together now. The sense of unreality descends on Will more intensely than ever. But whether this is a dream or a nightmare he no longer has the perspective to tell. He feels what Hannibal feels, so powerful, too powerful, it is devouring him. Hannibal leans in with total confidence and captures Will’s lips in his. And Will, for reasons he will never fully comprehend, returns the kiss in kind.

That’s when the dogs start barking.

Hannibal draws away. And what he sees on Will’s face stops him cold.

All of the emotion and confusion in his expression is gone. The tears have stopped. He is looking at Hannibal with a cold, evaluating gaze worthy of the man himself. He says:

“Sorry, Hannibal. But I’m afraid that *you* are going to be the one who’s coming with *me*.”

Hannibal’s eyes slowly narrow. He looks over Will’s shoulder, sees the gleam of flashlights moving through the long grass of Wolf Trap. The distant whirr of a helicopter circling the house. He looks back at Will in barely disguised horror. He understands in an instant the terrible trap Will has set for him. He understands just how completely Will has predicted him.

He knew Hannibal would be here, knew what Hannibal would want in coming here. Will was so far ahead of Hannibal he was looking back at him from the opposite shore, laughing at him.

“I’m not a sworn law enforcement official at the moment,” says Will, heart positively soaring in his chest at the look on Hannibal’s face, “so let’s just call this a citizen’s arrest.”

“You were lying to me,” whispers Hannibal.

“Role-playing,” says Will.

Then: “Hannibal Lecter, I am arresting you on behalf of the Federal Bureau of Investigation. You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law…”

Speaking these old familiar words, Will feels as though he is performing an exorcism, though whether on Hannibal or on himself he couldn’t say.

“…You have a right to an attorney. If you cannot—”

That’s as far as he gets before Hannibal is on him.

Will has forgotten that no amount of understanding can help him in a fight. He might have a bone-deep knowledge of Hannibal’s every move, but that doesn’t mean he has the reflexes or the strength to counter them. In a spare second Hannibal has knocked him to the floor—and when Will tries to punch Hannibal right in his bitten cheek, Hannibal grabs his wrist and gives it a single businesslike wrench. It snaps. Will howls. Hannibal immediately—with the studied motion of a man operating on automatic—slams his elbow into Will’s windpipe, so that Will’s scream is arrested in his throat.

Hannibal’s expression is stern. Pitiless. Denying his own woundedness. He pins Will with his knees. Pressing down on him with all his weight Hannibal begins throttling Will into the floorboards, his thumbs like screws tightening deeper and deeper into Will’s throat. Will coughs—sparks of red confetti in his vision—but despite his broken wrist he pounds at Hannibal’s arms and back, tries to claw at his face, but there is no shifting Hannibal, no touching Hannibal, Hannibal is a monolith out of Will’s reach and the world is fading fast, fading away—Jack isn’t going to get here in time…

The dogs are still barking, barking.

And even though there is no oxygen to feed Will’s rattling brain, a stray thought still manages to surface: strangulation is not Hannibal’s design….

He looks at Hannibal and sees *Quid Pro Quo* in his eyes. And just as Hannibal lowers himself down, teeth bared to take a bite out of Will’s face, Will takes advantage of Hannibal’s reduced leverage and head butts him. Will’s forehead connects with Hannibal’s teeth and they both cry out. Hannibal releases Will’s throat and Will is scrabbling to his feet, unbalanced, blood dripping in his eyes, choking raggedly as he staggers away, looking for a weapon before Hannibal recovers. He sees the linoleum knife on the hallway floor and hobbles after

it. He can hear Hannibal behind him—Hannibal is coming for him—Will isn't going to make it. Hannibal yanks his ankle out from under him and Will goes flying into a side table, which in an instant is reduced to scrap wood under his flailing weight. Will smashes his head on the floor and the world goes gray.

This might be it—but no, no, Will won't let it happen. With a strength he didn't know he had, he pushes himself with his throbbing wrist back into a crawling position and reaches, stretching painfully from his shoulders to his fingertips, every fiber focused on grabbing that linoleum knife, mere feet away. He can feel Hannibal's sharp fingers on his ankle again, yanking on it like it's a leash, increasing the distance between Will and the knife. Will claws at the floor but Hannibal keeps dragging him back and back and back. This accomplished, Hannibal steps over Will and goes after the knife himself.

Will vaults himself upright even though his whole body sings with pain and then he hurls himself after Hannibal, pulling him back, grappling without elegance, just two predators trying to paint each other red. Both of them—as one—reach desperately for the linoleum knife.

Will gets spun around so that his back slams against the hallway wall. Hannibal stands right in front of him, cornering him, one hand braced against the wall behind Will. Face to face for the final time.

The door to Will's house bursts open. The SWAT team fills the room and Jack is ahead of them, shotgun at the ready. He sees Will and Hannibal, slumped against each other as they stand in the hallway, blood pouring down from the gap between their bodies.

Jack's eyes go wide. "STEP AWAY FROM HIM. LECTER, DROP YOUR WEAPON AND STEP AWAY."

Hannibal doesn't obey. Will is wheezing into his shoulder. Hannibal's face is buried in Will's neck. Will can feel his lips moving against his skin.

"There now…" Hannibal whispers. "There now… it's over. It's all right. Nothing to fear any more."

"STEP BACK." Jack screams. "THIS IS YOUR FINAL WARNING."

"Will," asks Hannibal, and he draws his head back so he can look at his face, "how does it taste?"

As if in answer, Will pulls the linoleum knife out of Hannibal's midsection. And Hannibal falls, his intestines spilling out from the massive wound.

Jack momentarily stunned, having got this the wrong way around. And then, looking down at Hannibal, he shouts almost against his will: "We need medical in here!"

He looks over at Will, still half standing against the wall, covered in blood, linoleum knife still clutched in his hand, the blade weeping black gobs of Hannibal's insides.

“Will,” says Jack, voice suddenly gentle. “Come on now. Put the knife down.”

Will doesn’t react. He just watches, with large but expressionless eyes, as Hannibal bleeds out on the floor. Hannibal is still conscious, still looking up at Will, a question in his eyes. He appears to be smiling.

“Will,” a note of threat now in Jack’s voice, “drop it.”

But Will’s fingers only tighten around the knife. He is still staring at Hannibal. The EMTs are coming for him now. Blue and red lights flashing everywhere, painting the world a hectic blaze.

And finally, but so interminably slow, Hannibal’s lids slide shut. Only then does Will come back to himself, as much of himself as he can ever come back to.

Slowly he revolves his neck, until he is looking at Jack with nowhere eyes.

“Jack,” he says, voice colorless, polite, “consider this my two weeks notice.”

He drops the linoleum knife on the floor and walks away. Simple as that.

Jack doesn’t stop him. The medics don’t stop him. The SWAT team swarms around him but they don’t stop him either. He projects an untouchable air, soaked as he is head to toe in Hannibal Lecter’s blood, and his own. He is some otherworldly creature carving his path through their midst, and they recoil from him as he goes. He keeps walking, straight out of the house and into the night. Past the ambulances, the unmarked vans, the squad cars, he just keeps walking. He doesn’t know where he is going. Nowhere *to* go. All avenues closed to him. All futures lost.

He makes it halfway to the woods before his legs give out. He topples down on to the sparse grass. His chest is heaving.

He hears running footsteps behind him. “Will? Will!”

He looks over at her with sightless eyes. Her face twists in horror when she gets a look at him, but she recovers very quickly. Good old Bev.

“Come on back to the house,” she says, gesturing faintly towards the flashing lights. “You’re injured. Let the EMTs take a look at you.”

“The EMTs are busy,” Will says, noticing now how completely ruined his voice is from when Hannibal struck his throat. More a death rattle than a human sound.

“They’re saving his life, Bev,” he continues. “They’re gonna take him in that helicopter to the best hospital in the country so the doctors can sew him back together again.”

“Will, please…” says Beverly, eyes bright. She walks up to where he’s kneeling in the grass and puts her hand on his arm.

“All the king’s horses and all the king’s men…” sighs Will. “Christ, he’s going to live, isn’t he? I know he’s going to live.”

“He might,” says Beverly, tightly. “It’s not for you to decide.”

Will shakes his bloody head. “He’s taken everything from me. Wiped his poison over everything. I used to look out at my house in the dark and know that I was safe. But now look at it.”

They both look. They see the house with its lights on, like a boat rising up on a tossing ocean. Police and sirens and blinding lights surround it, swarm it, defile it. Will’s peaceful place, gone forever.

Beverly’s hand tightens on his shoulder as Will begins to cry.

No Name Key

Chapter Summary

Will doesn't have to see him to see him.

Chapter Notes

Before I send you off to Florida, I want to thank you for standing by me through all 26 chapters of this story. Thank you for reading, for leaving kudos, and for commenting. You guys are the best, and it has been my pleasure posting these installments and observing your reactions. I like to think we helped each other get through the He-Ate-Us together, transforming what might have been an excruciating wait into something special and exciting. And now it's over: the show is back, and the fic is finished. I wish I could see your faces as you read this—but then again, I don't have to see you to see you.

If you miss me, you can find me at after-the-ellipsis.tumblr.com. Also this might be of interest to you.

Looking up from his work on the rusted innards of the old Mercruiser, Will becomes aware of the slow black fly crawling over his elbow. He doesn't flick it away. Instead he goes panther-still and watches stony-faced as the fly makes its way down the length of his thin brown forearm. It moves steadily, with purpose, as if it knows where it's going. Its thready legs skitter over freckles and sun-bleached hair until it reaches Will's wrist, where it comes into contact with a smear of motor oil. The unexpected poison startles the fly, and off it buzzes.

Will sits back on his haunches. Wipes sweat from his forehead. He can feel a streak of heat on the back of his neck where the sun has burned him. He knows he shouldn't have rolled the Mercruiser out on the dock, not with the day being as sunny as it is, but he doesn't like working inside the repair shed. These days he can't stand being inside for very long; his heart moves too fast and his edges sharpen. Better to be out where he can see the water, even if the sun is beating down on him. Shielding his eyes, Will looks out over the Gulf, flat and pastel today, about as sunbaked as he is.

When he turns back to the boatyard, he sees Jo by the door of the repair shed, talking to a dark-haired stranger with white shirtsleeves rolled up to his elbows. The stranger has a very upright carriage; alert, athletic, trained.

Will watches them, more absent than curious, until Jo tilts back her fisherman's hat, looks out at the dock, and points right at Will. Instantly his insides knot. The stranger thanks her and begins heading Will's way. By the way the stranger walks, Will can tell he's carrying. He's FBI.

With renewed intensity Will goes back to working on the engine, which is propped with half its guts exposed both on the dolly and spilling out on to the wooden slats of the dock. He will have to replace the filter on the fuel pickup line. Frustrating, because Jo and Harold don't have any lying around for a Mercruiser as old as this. They'll have to order one. Or maybe the boatyard in Key Largo has something Will can repurpose to fit the Mercruiser; they have traded him parts before.

The FBI agent's shadow falls over Will where he is crouching. "Mr. Graham?"

The solenoid is a mess, too. He'll have to clean the washer, replace the post. The plug beneath looks corroded as well.

"You're Will Graham?"

The agent sounds dubious. Will is whipcord thin, very tan, and his hair is buzzed short: he looks nothing like his picture in the papers.

"Yes," says Will, still working on the engine.

"I'm Agent Luke Nuñez, from the Field Office in Miami Beach."

Will supposes he'd better put his wrench down. He unbends himself, gets to his feet, and looks at the agent. Luke Nuñez is younger than Will, and he has eager eyes. He also has a large red envelope wedged under his arm.

"It's an honor meeting you, sir." Agent Nuñez extends his hand, but Will doesn't shake it.

"My hands are dirty. How can I help you?"

The words are polite, but his tone is forbidding. He is looking Agent Nuñez right in the eyes. Will doesn't have a problem with eye contact any more, but he finds that most people have a problem returning the favor. They are unnerved by the way he looks right into them and then right through them when they fail to interest him. Agent Nuñez is no exception. He drops his eyes quickly.

"I—I have a delivery for you," he says, suddenly nervous. "From Quantico."

And he holds the red envelope out to Will.

Will takes it without a word. His name is on the envelope in Jack's handwriting and the envelope carries two stamps, one from the US Postal Inspector, the other from the FBI:

“BAU—Confidential”.

Will doesn’t ask what it is. He doesn’t care to know. He just says, “Thank you.”

“I need you to sign for it.”

Nuñez passes Will a receipt and a pen. Will crouches and uses the salt-washed deck as a flat surface. As he scrawls his name, Nuñez looks down at the top of his head and says:

“I’d just like to say something to you, sir. I’ve read a lot about you and I can’t tell you how much I admire you. At the Miami office everyone thinks you’re a real hero. Makes us feel a little more secure knowing you’re down here in Florida with us. It’s incredible work, what you did. I was just reading the interview, and honestly, sir, it—”

“Interview?” Will straightens up, hands Nuñez back the pen and receipt.

“In TattleCrime.”

Will is even more impassive than before. “I didn’t give an interview to TattleCrime.”

Agent Nuñez’s brow furrows. “The interview wasn’t with you, sir. It was with—” But Nuñez doesn’t complete this sentence. He has seen the look on Will’s face.

“Thank you for the package,” Will says, dismissal heavy in his voice.

“I—I’m sorry.” Agent Nuñez looks startled. “I assumed you knew about it. Uh…I’ll let you get back to work. You better be battening down the hatches around here, what with the storm coming and all.” He gives Will a smile, more pained than friendly.

Will says nothing. He is looking down at the red envelope, squinting as if trying to X-ray it. What could be important enough for Jack to send via courier, rather than to Will’s box at the Marathon Post Office?

Will looks up and catches Agent Nuñez throwing him a puzzled backward glance as he walks up the beach to the parking lot. Will is not what Agent Nuñez was expecting. A real hero—what does that even mean?

The envelope feels heavy, but not heavy enough for photographs. Good. Will unwinds the tie, and out slides a second envelope, white and letter sized. He catches a glimpse of the handwriting on its front—a glimpse is all he needs. He drops it. The letter bounces on the dock, landing face down.

Will stares at the fallen letter. Its sealed edge is smiling up at him.

He doesn’t know what to do.

Finally he picks it up with two fingers as if handling a dead rodent and walks it all the way to the end of the dock. He stretches out his hand, dangles the envelope over the water. Now he can read the writing on its front, his own name written out with a flourish to the right of the BSHCI seal.

Just let it go, he tells himself. *Let the Gulf have it. The ink will run unread. It's better that way.*

But he doesn't let it go. He just stands there, suspending the letter over the waves. He, too, is suspended. Out of the corner of his eye he sees something. Slowly he turns his head and looks out at the shoreline. There is a straight-backed figure watching him way in the distance, nothing but a shadow against the gray sand. But Will knows who it is.

He draws the letter back towards himself. As quickly as he can, he drops it into the larger courier envelope and winds the flap shut.

When he looks at the beach again, the figure is gone.

Will sticks the red envelope under his arm, walks back up the dock.

He wheels the dolly with the old Mercruiser across the concrete yard and into the repair shed. When he crosses the threshold, he automatically thinks: *eight doors*. The other mechanics in the repair shed glance at him curiously before returning to work. Meanwhile Jo sits at the counter, rubbing moisturizer into the skin of her upper arms. As always, she's playing The Beatles on her old stereo at soft volume:

> *I am he as you are he as you are me*
> *And we are all together*
> *See how they run like pigs from a gun see how they fly*
> *I'm crying…*

"What's your diagnosis?" she asks him, nodding at the Mercruiser.

"Age," says Will. "Needs a complete overhaul."

"I figured," Jo says. "The Gundersons haven't had it serviced in years. Harold'll help you with it."

"I'm going to need some parts."

"Sure. But no rush; they're not gonna be taking the boat out in this weather." Jo isn't really paying attention to what she's saying. She's too busy looking at the red envelope under his arm. "Everything all right, hon?"

"Yes," says Will.

> *Mister City policeman sitting*
> *Pretty little policemen in a row*
> *See how they fly like Lucy in the Sky see how they run*
> *I'm crying…*

He can feel her curiosity, and now that he knows to look for it, he can also tell she has been reading whatever there is to read on TattleCrime.

"I'm going to town for a while," he says. "You need anything?"

“Harold might.” The gleam of interest remains in Jo’s eyes. “You’ll be back, though? It’d be good to have your help with storm-proofing.”

Will nods and leaves without another word. The stereo peals after him: *Goo goo g’joob.*

He likes Jo fine. She lets him come and go as he pleases, and sometimes she even pays him. But it’d be nice if she stopped reading the tabloids.

He closes the front door behind him and amends the door count to *seven*.

Harold is smoking on the bench near the parking lot. Will doesn’t understand why he always comes out to this side of the shed for his cigarette break when on the opposite side he can see the water.

Harold nods at Will, and Will manages a smile back. He enjoys Harold. Easier to talk to than Jo.

“I’m going to town,” Will signs.

Harold nods.

“Can I bring you back something?” Will isn’t sure he has signed this correctly, but Harold understands. He shakes his almost empty package of cigarettes.

Will nods. “Sure.”

Harold gives him a funny salute with the cigarette, and then goes back to his own thoughts unperturbed.

Harold lost his hearing in Vietnam. He is amazing with diesel engines, and with machinery of all sorts. Almost a year ago now, when Will first started hanging around the Marathon boatyard, he didn’t know any sign language, but it didn’t matter. He and Harold communicated solely through fuel injectors and drive couplers. It was a good language for a conversation: no ambiguity, no lies, no strings.

This is a dangerous train of thought, so Will stops it, but too late. He looks over at his station wagon and sees a straight-backed figure watching him from the passenger seat.

“Fuck,” he mouths, and grinds the heel of his hand into his eye. When he looks back up, the figure is gone.

Will takes a moment to settle his thoughts down—not as gentle a mental process as it sounds; in reality it’s a lot of bashing and thwacking—and once he’s reasonably calm, he gets into the car, throws the red envelope into the empty passenger seat, and keys the ignition.

The highway is flat and sun-bleached just like the water. The palm trees sway, the sky is expansive and cloudless. Will drives with one arm out the window, feeling the wind on his skin. The weather is good today, deceptively beautiful. You’d never know there was a Class Two hurricane brewing over the Atlantic.

It's a ten-minute drive to the squat line of stores and offices that constitutes Marathon's main stretch. Will rolls up to the library and parks along the grassy verge. He doesn't immediately get out of the car; just sits in the driver's seat, tapping his fingers on his kneecaps.

He doesn't own a phone or a computer any more. For all he knows, the laptop he used at Quantico might still be in an evidence locker somewhere. As for the phone, Will threw it out the window of the station wagon while doing seventy-five on the interstate. Temporary insanity, probably, but he'd been so tired of listening to it ring and ring and ring during his long drive down to Florida. He'd caught hell for ditching the phone; in fact, he'd caught hell for his whole impromptu flight to Florida. Will took off from Beverly's without notifying anyone, without even notifying Beverly, and upon finding out Will was missing, Jack immediately convinced himself he'd jumped off a bridge and put out an APB on him. Will got an earful about it when he finally called Jack from the Jacksonville Sheriff's Office two days later. It was the first and only time Jack yelled at him since Will had been released from the hospital.

Jack can't really yell at him now, though. Mostly because Will doesn't actually talk to Jack, except via email. He comes to the public library to check it every few days. The boxy terminals in the computer lab are his only lifelines to the mainland, and he prefers to keep it that way. Even the remoteness of email can be too close for his comfort. Hence the necessity of his sitting in the station wagon for one minute longer, taking deep breaths, hands tightening into claws against his knees. He is very aware of the red envelope lying in the passenger seat, a triangle of sunlight bright on its corner. When he finally gets out of the car —before he can really think about what he's doing—he takes the red envelope with him, sticks it under his arm as he walks very quickly into the library.

The front door is *door eight*. The inner door is *door nine*. The door for the computer lab is *door ten*.

The lab is empty except for one older woman, squinting dubiously through her reading glasses at the screen. Will sits down at the terminal furthest from her and wedges the red envelope between the monitor and the wooden partition.

Jack doesn't exactly approve of Will using a public computer to access his FBI email account, but Jack has been forced to bear with this breach of protocol. Will has made it very clear that it's this or he stops talking to the FBI completely.

When Will logs in, he is unsurprised to see an email from Jack at the top of his inbox.

> ***Subject: Package***
>
> Heads up Will,
>
> I'm sending you a package via courier. It has been screened and declared by the boys at Postal Inspection to be contaminant-free. Should get to you at the Marathon boatyard by this afternoon. My inclination was not to send it to you at all, but I didn't think you'd

like me making that decision for you. However, if you want my advice, then here it is: don't open it. Just burn it. Burn it now.

I'm meeting with the Attorney General on Wednesday. We're going over the list of witnesses testifying for the prosecution. I'll be letting her know your decision.

Jack

Will sighs. He casts an uneasy glance at the red envelope, before replying:

RE: Package

I got it. Have you read it?

Will

Jack's response is very fast, less than a minute. Will is used to this. Jack drops whatever he's doing to talk to Will unless he's actually on a crime scene.

RE: Package

Just burn it.

Also I know I don't have to tell you this, but stay away from TattleCrime for the next few days. Other carriers, print and digital, are picking up a story there, so you should try to avoid all media if you can. I would tell you it will all blow over soon, but with the trial on its way we both know that isn't happening. So keep your head down and burn that letter.

I was just reading about Hurricane Grace. Hope you and the dogs are safe and bunkered down.

Will sighs. Jack hadn't exactly answered his question, but he supposes that is answer enough. He replies:

RE: Package

I appreciate the advice. I'll keep my head down through Hurricane Grace and everything else. Good luck with the AG.

Below Jack's emails is one from Beverly. When they aren't talking business, she usually just forwards him funny stories or dog videos, so he is surprised that she has actually written him a very long letter.

Subject: The blue bus is calling us

Hey Stranger,

How are you? I'd make some joke about rocking you like a hurricane, but I hear people in Florida don't find that kind of thing funny. So instead I'll just say I hope you're digging out a storm shelter and fitting little plastic boots on all the dogs.

I feel like it's been a long time since we really talked, and not to get all sappy or anything, but I miss you. I've been collating materials for the trial all week, and it is so weird that I'm constantly going through your statements and photos and belongings—the other day I was pulling fibers from the La-Z-Boy in your old living room—I seem to be analyzing your DNA all the time, and yet I never see you! I hope you're ok. I know that's a pointless thing to say, but I mean it. I worry about you on basically a daily basis. I try to cheer myself up by picturing you in a Hawaiian shirt surrounded by retirees, lying around on a beach, sipping some tropical drink with one of those little paper umbrellas balanced on the rim. I hope you have a whole collection going of little paper umbrellas, one in every color. That's my dream for you, Will.

Things are ok here. Strange, of course—but have things ever not been strange around here? We're getting through it somehow. Brian joined the FBI softball team on a dare from Jimmy. He pretends to hate it but we can all tell he's having the time of his life. Apparently he's a great pitcher? Who knew. Meanwhile Jack has become one of those insufferable vegetarians who will not shut up about the health benefits of garbanzo beans. I'm not kidding: whenever there's a silent moment, Jack starts lecturing us all on the evils of the food industry and why our digestive systems function more efficiently if we eat only soy protein. Please save me, Will. Hannibal Lecter has SO MUCH to answer for.

This trial is going to be a bitch, but we're doing everything we can, so don't worry about it. Honestly you've done enough, answering my questions (and Jack's and probably half the Justice Department's by now, I bet). Seriously, don't let anyone give you grief for being MIA because I know you've already made yourself more available than you want to be. You really helped clear up the chronology for my testimony, so thanks for that. I was prepping with the prosecutor yesterday, and it's like no statement I've ever had to make in court. I don't know how I'll be able to do it with him watching me, but hey, it'll get done. I think you're making the right decision, staying far away from this circus. Staying far away from him. God, I can't believe anyone is even questioning your decision there.

But they are questioning it, Will. That's part of why I'm writing this. I want to warn you, because I know Jack is trying to shield you from all the politics, but you really ought to know that there are a lot of people insisting you testify. The DOJ is putting lots of pressure on Jack to talk to you about it, maybe even to subpoena you (I hope it doesn't come to that). So far Jack has been holding up, but I'm worried he might crack. Things are pretty bad for him right now. His wife was hospitalized last week; she's back home now, but Jack says she's weak. It's really tough. So don't be surprised if he makes some play to get you back here, ok? Have your answer ready. And that answer better be NO. No matter what anyone says, we don't need you here to convict Hannibal Lecter. So stay in Florida and have a Mai Tai for me, please.

I also wanted to write to you about a thing in TattleCrime that I'm sure Jack has warned you not to read. I don't think you're ever going to be able to stay away from it, even in the Keys (maybe you should have bought a private island with that retirement package, huh?) so my advice is to read it before someone springs it on you unexpectedly. I'm not saying you're going to sleep better at night having looked at it, but I don't see how you'll ever get away with ignoring stuff like this when it's completely omnipresent. Jack is dead set on protecting you from just about everything that's going on, but personally I don't think you need that kind of protection. I don't think you've ever needed it.

Ok, that's it for Things I Think You Should Know About That No One Is Telling You. Sorry if I'm being out of line, but you know I prefer to be honest with you. You slept on my couch for three weeks, watched me cry at *My Girl* (sshhh our little secret) and I'm still picking dog hair out of every upholstered surface in my apartment—I think we're at a place in our friendship where we can be honest with each other. And the honest truth is that no matter how shocking it was for me when you took off, I really believe it was the right thing, you leaving all of us behind and driving yourself and the pooches off to paradise. So no hard feelings. About any of it. You get a free pass. You get at least five more free passes as far as I'm concerned. You just do your thing.

And now I'm realizing this got very long and kind of confrontational. I'm sorry, Will. The trial's so close and then I read that stupid interview and I guess all of it has been bringing up some feelings for me. No one here really gets what I'm going through the way you do. We have some war stories together, don't we? At least that's all they are now—stories.

Don't let that hurricane blow you back to Quantico. That's all I'm saying.

Your comrade-in-arms,

Beverly

Her letter is a lot to take in. She clearly doesn't know about Jack's 'package', otherwise she definitely would have warned him about that, too.

For a few minutes he just sits there, staring with slightly unfocused eyes at the monitor. He can read between the lines. He knows what's bothering Beverly. He feels bad for having gone

so long without talking to her about anything real; his silence has clearly driven her to this explosion of feeling. He had tried to burn all his bridges, including her, but Will is beginning to realize that bridges aren't as flammable as he'd like them to be.

He is so lost in thought he doesn't notice his fingers moving of their own accord, almost flying over the keyboard as they type.

The front page for TattleCrime loads slowly on the old computer. Will's eyes are still unfocused, so it takes him a moment before he can actually read the banner headline. Simple. Obvious. He's disappointed in Freddie Lounds.

Step Inside the Mind of 'Cannibal' Lecter

He scrolls down and sees the lead photo and it gives him a shock because he wasn't expecting it to be a *new* photo, a photo of Hannibal sitting behind bars with an expression of polite beckoning on his face as if inviting the photographer to come inside the cell with him, and the bite mark is now just a little scar, two purple lines that meet on his cheekbone in an arch, like an arrow pointing up at Hannibal's eye, *look here please*, and that's about all Will can take.

He jabs at the mouse, closes the window, stands up unsteadily. Tremors wrack him, from his wrists to his shoulders, and he rubs the gooseflesh out of his arms. He knows he's going to have to sit back down and log out of his email, but he can't bring himself to do it, not when he has just seen Hannibal's face on that screen. He feels Hannibal is still inside the monitor, just behind the faded pixels and greasy fingerprints, watching him unceasingly.

He is aware of the old woman, turning in her rickety desk chair to stare at him. He doesn't stare back. Instead he stands there, rubbing absently at his arms and biting his fingernails, until enough of the raw terror has drained out of him so he can sit back down and log off the computer like a normal person. When he stands up again, he immediately has to double back: he has forgotten the red envelope. He grabs it and all but runs out of the library: *nine doors*, *eight doors*, and finally back to *seven* as he walks on gelatin legs to his car.

Only to find Hannibal Lecter sitting in the passenger seat, waiting for him patiently.

Will's imagination is as responsive as it ever was: it has incorporated his new knowledge, adding the arrow-shaped scar to Hannibal's face. Heaven forbid he not be up-to-date.

Hannibal gives Will a little smile.

Will turns on the spot.

Instead of driving, he walks the eight sun-drenched blocks to the liquor store, picks up a box of Morley's for Harold and a bottle of Johnny Walker for himself. When he gets back to the station wagon, he keeps his eyes on his sneakers as he blindly drops his purchases and the red envelope into the back seat. He doesn't immediately get in. He stands on the curb with his arms draped bonelessly atop the hot roof of the car. He rolls his sunburnt neck, full of anger at himself for having listened to Beverly for even a second about reading that fucking interview. What was he thinking? Now that photograph is burned onto the surface of his

mind, visual proof that Hannibal is alive and healed and happening, always happening, inside the Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane.

But he isn't just inside that hospital. If only that were the only place he lived.

Will realizes he is biting his fingernails again. Stops himself. He has been trying to kick the habit for months with limited success. His nails look better than they did when he was first released from the hospital, but they are still peeled back, bitten almost to the quick.

Finally he gets into the station wagon, and although he stops himself from looking over at the passenger seat, he can still sense Hannibal sitting there, watching him, mouth crooked in wry amusement.

Will starts the engine and drives.

He sees Hannibal on and off. Mostly in the guise of the good doctor, but occasionally as the bloody specter or as the desperate petitioner clad in Will's own clothes. Sometimes Will goes without seeing him for a week or more, so that a shoot of hope breaks through the hard crust of his mind and slowly grows: maybe he won't see Hannibal again, maybe that last time will really be the last, maybe he is finally experiencing what they call healing. But Hannibal always comes back. Usually in times of stress, especially at those times when Will is thinking about his former life. Though Hannibal will sometimes appear for no reason at all: in the middle of a good quiet day when Will is elbow deep in an engine, while he's sitting on his deck in the sling back chair watching for Key deer, or when he's walking with the dogs on an empty beach. No time or place is safe from Hannibal.

The first month after Will moved to Florida, he was seeing Hannibal almost nonstop and was half-delirious with exhaustion, because at night he could *feel* Hannibal sitting on the porch, staring at Will as he tried to sleep. So he'd gone to Miami to see a neurologist—because wasn't that how it started last time, with Will seeing Garret Jacob Hobbs in places he had no right to be?—even though he knew he was grasping at straws, *looking in the wrong corner for an answer to this.* But he would have loved to blame a relapse of encephalitis for what he was experiencing.

So of course when the friendly neurologist sat him down, made him drink a glass of water, and informed him in a slow calm voice that his MRI and blood work had all come back clean, Will felt utterly bereft, even though he'd already known this wasn't the work of inflammation. This was Will's own work. While inside the Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane he had done ungodly damage to his psyche, under Hannibal's direction he had warped and mutated his own thinking, and when he got out of the hospital he had maimed it, yanked the thinking out by the root, dashed the pendulum against the unforgiving insides of his mind over and over until it shattered, dismantling as much of his understanding as he could without wrecking his ability to function, and this is the end result. Now he is a haunted man.

The neurologist gave him the card for a therapist in Key West. Will threw the card out the window of his car on the drive back from Miami.

Hannibal tires of watching him, and instead tilts his face towards the passenger side window, shutting his eyes as he soaks up the afternoon sunlight. What does it mean when a figment of your imagination gets bored of you? Should Will be offended? He takes advantage of Hannibal's inattention, glances at him out of the corner of his eye. He notices how the fine ends of Hannibal's hair shiver in the wind; he is so real, so very very real, every little detail present and accounted for. Will is sure if he were to reach over and touch the heavy suit fabric covering Hannibal's shoulder, that would feel real, too—but he has never touched this Hannibal, and isn't about to try.

Hannibal doesn't speak to Will. He never speaks any more. Will suspects, *hopes*, that he has so mutilated the part of his mind able to provide Hannibal with speech that Hannibal will have to remain forever wordless. But Will is also aware of the way this projection has been creeping out of his control. There was a time when he could always make Hannibal disappear if he concentrated hard enough. But not any more. Now it's a surprise when he can make Hannibal obey any of his commands. A few times he has worked himself into a migraine trying to make him disappear, but this Hannibal has become as intractable, as unshakable, as the real thing.

Will just has to ignore him. Hannibal hates being ignored. Eventually he will go away.

When Will gets back to the boatyard, he leaves the red envelope in the station wagon. He just grabs the Morley's and walks across the lot to the repair shed without looking back. But he can still feel Hannibal's eyes on him, burning as fiercely as the sunburn on Will's neck.

Jo recruits him and few of the other mechanics to secure chains around the boats moored in the canal. Will, happy to be outside again, works with such single-mindedness that Jo has to tap him on the shoulder twice before she can get his attention.

"You know," she says, as she leans against a wooden post, "the emergency shelters, they don't take pets."

Will looks over Jo's shoulder and sees Hannibal standing in the shadows under the overhanging roof of the repair shed.

"What did you say?" he asks, distracted.

"You can't take dogs in the shelters," Jo says. "If there's an evacuation order, you're gonna have to go some place else. You got somewhere to go?"

"Um. No, not really."

Jo nods. “My sister’s got a place out in Cutler Bay. Harold and I might go there, depending. There’s a lot of room. Why don’t I give you the address?”

Hannibal smiles, very faintly.

“I—uh,” says Will.

“It’s just in case.” Jo is friendly but very insistent. She sees the reluctance on his face. “Listen, you’re new to all this, but in these storms, you always want to be prepared. Have your worst-case scenario all worked out.”

“I’ve dealt with hurricanes before,” says Will, thinking of Biloxi and the way the old trailer he shared with his dad used to rock back and forth in the high wind just like a boat.

“Then you know it’s no joke,” says Jo. “I’ll give you the address. My sister’s a dog lover, too; she’s always picking new ones up. She’ll be fine with it. How many dogs do you have?”

“Ten,” says Will, but then he remembers Violet. “Eleven.”

Jo raises her eyebrows, but she says, “Emily’ll be fine with it. Also she’d probably be fine looking after them, when you go—uh—out of town.”

Behind Jo, Hannibal cants his head, a look of sudden penetrating interest on his face. Meanwhile Will looks into Jo: his blistering stare. “Why would I go out of town?”

Jo can’t handle it. She drops her eyes, unable to prod him further. “I don’t know. Just thought you might want to go visiting or something.”

“I won’t be doing that,” says Will, crisply.

Jo nods, eyes still dropped. “Well, if you do, let me know.”

And she walks off to talk to one of the other mechanics, visibly relaxing as soon as her back is turned to Will. Will glances over at Hannibal and sees that he is smiling with all his teeth. Will throws down the end of the chain link he’s clutching and hops back on to the deck. He needs a break.

Door eight. He finds Harold in the repair shed, working on the Mercruiser. Hannibal is there too, leaning casually against the front counter.

Will joins Harold in looking at the disassembled crankshaft.

“What do you think?” Will signs to him. “It’s a mess.”

“Seen worse,” says Harold, in his loud slurred voice.

“We’ll need new parts,” Will signs, pointing at the solenoid.

“Nah.”

“You can fix it?”

Harold nods.

“You can make it run?”

Harold rolls his eyes at him. “It will run.”

“But not like new,” signs Will.

Harold scratches his chin in thought. “It will run different,” he says. “But it will run.” Now he gives Will a closer look. “Joey giving you trouble? About the storm?”

Will shrugs.

“She wants you to stay with us up at her sister’s. She’s really worried. Thinks you’ll get swept away if you stick it out on No Name Key.” Harold smiles to himself. “Joey’s always thinking this is gonna be the Big One. Every time. But this isn’t the Big One. You’ll know when it’s the Big One. So don’t worry about it. Won’t be any evacuation.”

Over Harold’s shoulder, Will sees Hannibal lean out the window, looking up at the cloudless sky as if trying to summon rain. The Beatles are still softly playing on the radio next to him:

> *Limitless undying love which shines around me like a million suns*
> *It calls me on and on, across the universe…*

“You’ll be fine,” says Harold, going back to the Mercruiser.

> *Nothing’s gonna change my world,*
> *Nothing’s gonna change my world,*
> *Nothing’s gonna change my world,*
> *Nothing’s gonna change my world…*

Will drives home over the Seven Mile Bridge with the station wagon’s windows rolled entirely open. The temperature outside is dropping now, the humidity intensifying, but it still feels really good. He loves this drive, loves how he can see nothing but water around him on all sides. It’s like flying. His mood lifts and when he glances at his rear view mirror, it takes him a moment to register that Hannibal is gone. But in his place the red envelope, sitting there forgotten and seemingly benign. Will does not remember moving it to the passenger seat.

Will lives in the last house on the end of No Name Key, a tiny island off Big Pine, about thirty miles from Key West. Will likes No Name because it feels like wilderness, all creeping mangroves and tall grass. His house seems swallowed up in leaves like a jungle hideaway. The dogs love how uninhabited the island is. Will often lets them roam around outside,

probably more often than he should, for freedom has made them a little wild. When he opens the front door, he is almost knocked off his feet by so many happy tail-wagging bodies.

He puts the whiskey and the red envelope down on the kitchen counter and crouches to greet the dogs individually, paying particular attention to the new additions to the pack. Violet still bears deep scars from abandonment and deprivation; she is constantly anxious, convinced whenever Will leaves the house that he is leaving her forever. He cradles her monkeyish face, smiles at the way her wide eyes stare in opposite directions. When she is finally sated with affection, Will opens the door and lets the pack spill out on to the porch.

He doesn't immediately join them. He remains at the kitchen counter, looking down at the red envelope. *Burn it*, Jack said. Of course Jack read the letter. Maybe he told himself he was doing it so Will wouldn't have to, but Will knows that isn't the real reason. The real reason is the same reason Jo wants Will to stay with her at her sister's place in Cutler Bay: curiosity, simple curiosity, burning curiosity, curiosity about Will, curiosity about Hannibal, the desire to know and even be included in the strange and unbreakable intimacy they share. If Jack knew what it was like, he would stop prying. If anyone knew what it was like, they would leave him be. They would put him under quarantine, treat him like a leper, if they knew what it was that lives inside his mind.

He picks up the envelope almost daintily, balancing it on his fingertips. Looking at TattleCrime had been a minor mistake. Reading this letter would be a monumental fuck up.

A wet nose presses to the back of his knee. Will looks down and sees that Winston has returned for him and is looking up at Will with large impatient eyes.

"All right," Will says. "I'm coming."

He puts the envelope back down on the counter and joins the dogs on the porch. Together they go down the gravel path to the beach. Will takes off his sneakers and walks with his ankles in the Gulf; meanwhile the dogs lollop deeper in the surf, sending up jets of spray as they frolic. Will joins them for a few minutes, and then throws himself down on the sand to dry off. A few of the most waterlogged dogs follow him, flopping down with their sides pulsing as they pant, pink tongues out and glistening.

Will sweeps sand off his calves and shins. Leans back to look up at the sky, burnished red with the setting sun. He feels his awareness of himself doubling, as if he is both lying on this beach and standing a great distance away, watching himself lie on this beach. Often in moments of peace he feels this way. Like a fraud, a phony, playacting at happiness for the benefit of some outside observer. A happy person might ruffle Winston between his ears, help him shake the sand out of his heavy coat—so Will does this. A happy person might lope back to the house to get dinner for the hungry pack—so Will does this, too. *Eight doors*. He goes to the fridge, fetches his catch from backcountry fishing yesterday: mostly grouper, and a couple big bonefish. On his way past the kitchen counter, he scoops up the red envelope as if it means absolutely nothing to him, the way a happy unaffected person might. *Seven doors*. He leads the pack back to the beach, finds his campfire grill, and gets a fire started. By the time the sun sets, Will and the dogs are all dining on very crispy fish.

As the dogs fall into a doze, Will sits with his arms wrapped around his knees, watching the dying play of the flames. Now's the moment. He picks up the red envelope. The fire crackles, ready and waiting. A happy person might burn this letter without a second thought, on the understanding that this is the only way to preserve and sustain the precious happiness he has fought so hard to cultivate. But Will doesn't burn the letter. He just sits there, staring. The sense of performance is on him too strong; he feels paralyzed by his own fakery: stage fright.

Eventually the fire dies out. Will wedges the red envelope back under his arm, rouses the pack, and they head home in the dark.

Will has a bed inside the house, but he prefers sleeping out with the dogs on the porch, weather permitting. Since the weather permits it tonight, he rolls out his sleeping bag, and the dogs drop down exhausted all around him, curling up into commas of sleep almost immediately. Will isn't quite ready to join them. He goes inside the house—*eight doors, nine doors*—brushes his teeth, and when he comes back into the kitchen, he picks up the red envelope again. He doesn't like it lying out here like this, free and unwatched, while he goes to sleep. He looks around the living room, contemplating the problem.

Will's house has very little furniture. He keeps meaning to buy some, or even to make some, but he hasn't gotten around to it yet. He spends so little time indoors. However he does have a desk; he uses it mostly for fly-tying. Will slips the red envelope into the bottom drawer and locks it. Then he takes the desk key out to his station wagon and locks it in the glove compartment. There. That ought to remove temptation pretty thoroughly.

Back on the porch he suddenly feels overwhelmed by tiredness. He sees that Violet has tucked herself up inside his sleeping bag, and gently he pushes her out, and though she huffs in protest, she is happy curling up next to his chest instead. When Will squints his eyes he can see the outlines of the mangroves and the thick black sky full of stars. He can feel the gentle pressure of Winston lying at his back. This is good, this is safe, this is home. He sleeps.

Violet is gone, and he is searching for her, calling for her, but she won't come. He checks the deck and the upstairs floor, goes out to the dock where his boat is tied, but he can't find Violet anywhere. In the living room he hears a scuffling sound, a drag and a whine. It's coming from inside the wall.

Panic skitters in his veins. How did Violet get in there? He pulls the desk away from the wall to get a better look. Then he grabs his toolbox. With a hammer he begins smashing at the wall, trying not to make too much noise because he doesn't want to terrify Violet any further. She is really keening now, a horrible sound. Every swing of the hammer sends a puff of plaster dust into the air, and Will is soon covered in dust and dirt as he tears out chunks of his own wall.

He makes the hole bigger and bigger, large enough for him to fit his arm and shoulder inside. But before he can reach into the hole, out of it comes a strange trickle of rust-colored fluid. It is thick, muddy, like river sludge. The sludge dribbles out of the hole in the wall, sliding down the yellow wallpaper onto the floor. And the walls must be full of the stuff, because the sludge keeps coming, drooling out of the hole in little bursts. And Will tries to stop it, tries to plug it up, but his efforts make no difference and soon he is coated from fingertips to elbows in viscous gunk. Violet is still crying inside the wall—she must be drowning in the rusty

sludge—so Will overcomes his revulsion and sticks his arm all the way inside the hole, pawing through the sludge. Soggy pieces of the wall fall out all around him, the hole growing wider and wider as he clutches blindly for Violet, but he still can't reach her.

"Need a hand?"

Alana is standing by the front door with her hands in her pockets and a rueful smile on her face.

"I could make some noise, shoo away any predators at your door."

"Ah hah," Will laughs, weakly, with his arm and shoulder buried in the hole he has made in his own wall. "No, thanks. I've got it."

He doesn't want Alana to see the god-awful mess. If she finds out he has lost little Violet inside the wall, what will she think of him?

Meanwhile the sludge is pouring out past his arm, gushing over him, drenching his t-shirt, sliding down his legs, and he mustn't let Alana see, because he can smell it now, the bright coppery smell of blood.

"Will," says Alana, in a trembling voice. "Please let me help."

But he can't. He reaches deeper into the hole and finally he finds something. He grips it tight and pulls; the wall offers up resistance for just a second but then he tugs it free and sees that he has liberated not Violet but a long meaty rope of intestines that drips blood and slime onto his bare feet. And he keeps pulling and pulling, great coils of slippery intestines spooling through his fingers and piling behind him on the floor. Finally Alana sees what he's doing and she screams and cries as the mountain of human entrails grows larger and larger between them—

He wakes up to soft dawn light, soft sleeping dogs, and Hannibal Lecter sitting on the porch chair, watching him with lidded eyes. Will is reeling from his dream, not because of the terror but at the aching shock of seeing Alana alive again. He doesn't have the self-possession yet to ignore Hannibal. Instead he stares right at him from out of his fort of warm dog bodies, and Hannibal stares back. He looks very alert, guard-like, as if he has been watching Will sleep all night long. And Will already knows, looking at Hannibal, that this is going to be one of the bad days, one of the days when no matter what Will does, no matter how he feels, Hannibal will not go away.

Hannibal sits on the porch, watching Will as he wakes up the dogs and sends them into the yard to do their business. Hannibal sits on the wicker chair in the living room, watching Will as he fills the dogs' bowls for breakfast. Will goes upstairs to shower and change, and Hannibal sits on the end of his unused bed, watching Will do those things, too.

Will can't afford to get upset about this. He just has to accept it as his day's reality and move on. The hurricane is due to make landfall at dusk.

From the garage he retrieves the storm shutters he purchased over the summer, and takes them out to the yard with his toolbox and a ladder. He carefully installs the shutters on all his windows, and though he has kept the dogs inside the house, they come over in turn to each window he is in the process of covering up and watch him with questioning eyes as he drills. He feels he is locking them away, a bad feeling, even though he knows it's for their own protection. At one point towards the end, Will looks down at the bottom of the ladder and sees Hannibal standing there, bracing his arms on the rails, looking up at Will playfully, as if he's contemplating what might happen if he pushed the ladder over. Will doesn't like that at all. He finishes shuttering the second floor windows and scrambles back down the ladder, his nerves jitterbugging.

He goes into the house—*eight*—ignores Hannibal, who is sitting in the wicker chair and looking pleased with himself, opens the bottle of Johnny Walker, and pours some into his coffee mug.

That afternoon he takes the station wagon out one last time for a supply run. Will turns on the radio, and he and Hannibal listen to the latest updates on Hurricane Grace, still a Category 2 storm and causing massive rainfall now in the Bahamas. The weather reflects the storm's increased proximity: the sky teems with silver clouds, and the trees are flailing in the wind.

The supermarket is full of people, even though many of the shelves are already picked clean of both perishable and nonperishable goods. The shoppers are in strange, heightened moods: some of them joke together with a sense of hokey camaraderie that rings very false, while others are intent and almost competitive as they fill their carts with canned peaches and bottled water. Hannibal eyes the half-empty racks of Hostess cakes with distaste.

All Will really needs is dog food. He loads up his cart with it and with plastic jugs of water. For himself he buys only peanut butter, wheat crackers, salted nuts, and several packs of beef jerky. This last makes Hannibal raise his eyebrows.

The checkout line is long, anarchic, and slow moving. The man in front of Will is not dealing very well with the pace.

"Can you believe this?" he keeps saying loudly to no one. "Can't you get any more cashiers working out here? Some of us have drives to make!"

The woman working the cash register gives him a quelling look.

"Don't look at me like that, missy! I'm a paying customer, or I will be if you ever get around to actually *ringing me up*. Jesus! Could this be any slower?" He looks around the line for support, but the other customers avoid his gaze. Not Hannibal, though; as he watches the man, the corners of his mouth slowly darken.

The man doesn't notice Hannibal, of course. What he notices is a woman in the next lane who has paused to gather up a few of the remaining batteries from the standup shelves near the conveyor belt. The man takes advantage of her distraction, swerves his cart and cuts in front of her, begins loading his own groceries onto the belt before she wises up. When she finally turns around, she says: "Hey!"

The man shrugs. "Snooze you lose." Then leers at her as the cashier rings him up. As he leers, he clocks the way Will is watching him.

"What are you looking at?"

"You," says Will.

He sees the pulse beating in the man's throat, the creases of flab at his armpits, the swell of his stomach underneath his tank top, the rolls of skin across the back of his neck. Waste of good flesh.

Hannibal scents the air, and slowly dips his head, bright eyes on Will.

Something changes in the man's face as he looks at Will. Animal fear.

"Apologize to her," says Will. "You should have waited your turn."

"I—" The man is alarmed, and confused by the alarm he feels. "It's none of your business, guy. What's your problem?"

He turns the fleshy expanse of his back on Will and thrusts his credit card at the cashier.

"Nice try," says the woman in the line next to Will, giving him a little smile.

Will doesn't hear her. The room is swaying hard and the lights are too bright. His stomach rumbles.

He abandons his cart on the squeaky linoleum, winds his way out of line, and staggers through the sliding doors—*seven*. He doubles over near the bushes to the side of the parking lot, braces his clammy hands on his knees. But he isn't sick. It's just that he'd like to be. He'd feel better if the thoughts in his head had the power to make him physically ill.

He is aware of Hannibal, standing near the curb, watching him expectantly.

Will straightens up, hides his eyes in the crook of his elbow, feeling something very like despair. A pounding in the sky, deep and low. Thunder.

He is aware of footsteps approaching him, but he ignores them. The soft noise of grocery bags placed on the sidewalk next to him.

"You forgot your dog food."

Will takes his arm away from his eyes and sees the woman from the line. She has an amiable, slightly wary expression on her face.

“It’s ok,” she says. “Rudeness makes me sick, too. Maybe not so literally, but...”

Will looks down at the bags she has placed at his feet: they are filled with his own groceries. “You didn’t have to do that,” he mutters.

The woman shrugs. “It’s fine.”

He feels for the wallet in his back pocket. “How much do I owe you?”

Now the woman smiles at him. She has nice teeth, very blunt and even. “Don’t sweat it. I know you’re good for it.”

“How could you know that?”

He looks into her now—and to his surprise, she meets his stare. Doesn’t look away.

“I’ve seen you around. I know you’re local. You have a lot of dogs, huh? That’s a sizable amount of kibble.”

“Yes,” he says. “Lots of dogs. You’re local, too?”

“Sugarloaf,” she says.

“No Name.”

“Well,” she says, grinning a little, “it’s nice to meet you, No Name. Make sure those dogs don’t go hungry during the storm, ok?”

He tries a smile back, and it doesn’t feel completely strange. “Ok,” he says. “See you around, Sugarloaf.”

“Bye.”

She swings her hair over her shoulder and walks off with her bags. It only occurs to him once she’s already loading her trunk that he should have offered to carry the bags for her. He has forgotten how these things work.

Hannibal is no longer standing on the curb. Will’s heart lightens: gone for now? But no, he has merely wandered off. Will sees his straight-backed silhouette inside the station wagon. Biding his time.

Will sighs. He gathers up his bags as the woman from Sugarloaf drives away.

Will approaches the station wagon and notices an envelope tucked between the windshield wipers. A flare-up of panic. It can’t be the letter; it’s locked in the desk drawer and he would remember, wouldn’t he, if he’d taken it back out again?

Will frees the envelope from his wipers: it is delicate and square. ‘Will’ is written across the front in handwriting unfamiliar to him, sloped and looping.

He puts his groceries in the backseat. Leans against the hood as he opens the letter. Hannibal watches him intently through the windshield as he unfolds it and reads:

Will,

Forgive the tardiness of this message. I have been meaning to write to you for many months, as there is so much that remains unsaid between us, but it has been difficult for me to overcome my diffidence and my fear that in writing to you, I might somehow reveal my location to Hannibal Lecter. Hence the unconventional manner of this letter's delivery. I ask you not to trace this. I remain very careful about my safety, and my safety is in my secrecy. I trust you can understand, and I encourage you to protect your hiding place with the same vigilance as I protect mine.

I hope you can also pardon the abruptness of my departure from Baltimore last year. I know how you must have interpreted it, and while it pained me to cause you further distress, I knew I needed to disappear as quickly as I could. During the course of my final dealings with Hannibal, he realized I had visited you, and I knew my time was short. I would have liked to see you one last time, but I dared not risk it. As soon as the first reports of the "Chesapeake Ripper's" killing spree reached me, I made my escape. Hannibal's flair for the dramatic has always been a weakness; he should not have so publicly signaled his intentions regarding me. He all but warned me to go. At times I wonder if perhaps *that* was his true intent.

I confess, when I left Baltimore, I was certain you would fail in your quest. I had convinced myself that Hannibal Lecter could not be caught, by you or by anyone. I told you as much. But I misjudged you, Will. I underestimated your abilities; it seems that Hannibal did the same, and it led to his undoing. You are more than what he made of you. You see through him and beyond him. You are, and have always been, outside his comprehension. I don't put that forward as a compliment. If I were you, I would consider it a cause for concern. You became something unthinkable even to Hannibal Lecter, and there will be consequences. Perhaps you are already feeling them.

I don't know how you spend your days, but I spend mine awake, and aware, and waiting for him. I keep my lights on. I watch the horizon. I patrol the blind spots behind my shoulders. There is no prison that can hold him, no bars strong enough to keep him contained. This period of peace you have so dearly bought for all of us is merely the eye inside a great storm. We cannot survive unless we continue to remind ourselves that rain will fall once more.

What worries me now is what he will do, walled up in his prison cell, forced to abandon the things that keep him civilized. There is still his pattern to consider. I am speaking neither of his murderousness, nor of what he did with his victims after they were dead. I am speaking of his true pattern, the pattern no one can ever force him to abandon no matter how chained and muzzled they may keep him. The pattern that drew you and me into his orbit, and will hold us there for as long as we live. I am speaking of his tendency to love, and love well, and love powerfully. I am speaking of the way he moves from one love object to the next, in search of something he will never find. I watched him

choose you. I charted the progress of his adoration as it grew and I was grieved by it, not only for your sake, but for mine. It taxes the spirit to be the object of such love, only to see that love be transferred to someone else. Some day you will understand.

I fear for that next worthy person, whoever he or she may be. From me he learned understanding and self-control. From you he learned betrayal. He takes what he learns, and he moves on. He goes on, always. And so must we.

I think of you often,

Bedelia du Maurier

Will reads the letter over and over, as the pre-storm wind tugs at his hair and clothes. He feels overwhelmed with emotion: relief that du Maurier is alive, but also a strange sense of injury and defensiveness, similar to the feelings she inspired in him when she visited his cell over a year ago. He had felt, when he met her, that du Maurier resented him for reasons unknown, but now those reasons have become apparent. *It taxes the spirit…* He doesn't know what to make of it. He is surprised—and disturbed—that she has chosen to call what Hannibal does 'love'. Will refuses to describe it that way, refuses to credit it. Love is more than the mockery Hannibal makes of it.

Some day you will understand.

Will's heart is beating faster than it should. He looks up, looks for Hannibal, and sees that he is no longer inside the station wagon. Now his heart is really speeding. But Hannibal hasn't left him. He has just wandered off again. Now he's standing at the edge of the parking lot, with his hands in the pockets of his dress slacks, his back to Will as he looks out at the wedge of ocean visible to him from that vantage point, listening to the ominous crackle of the waves against the wooden dock.

He will go on. So must we.

Will clutches the letter. He walks towards Hannibal, then past him, right down to the dock. Hannibal follows him, prowling in the shadows of the mangrove trees, as Will ventures out to the end of the dock and tears du Maurier's letter into halves, quarters, eighths, before sprinkling the fragments in the water.

Hannibal doesn't get back in the car with him. Instead Hannibal watches from the curb as Will drives away. Every time Will checks the side mirrors, he sees Hannibal standing alongside the highway, an unmoving silhouette in the greater distance. Meanwhile the storm clouds build up behind him, higher and darker all the time.

Will drives home to No Name. Takes the groceries inside. *Eight doors*. Hannibal isn't sitting in the wicker chair. Hannibal hasn't come back inside the house with him.

The dogs are restless, bright-eyed; they sense the storm. Will releases them for a final moment of freedom, while he does one last pass around the house—*nine doors, ten doors,*

nine doors, eight doors—checking every strap and bolt to ensure the place is stormproof. He parks the car in the garage along with his boat, and hangs up netting across the garage door to secure it. When he goes out one last time to call the dogs in, he feels the first drops of rain.

The dogs come inside easily, made anxious by the rain, and Will follows them. *Eight doors,* probably the final count for the night. Will throws every lock in the house, fits wind-resistant panels on the front door and the sliding door that leads out to the deck—and when he is finished, he and the dogs are officially safe and dry and ready for the storm. The only thing is, they are also locked up like prisoners in the now windowless interior of Will's dark house.

The dogs hear the rain falling against the roof, and their ears prick. Will feels primed and strange, as if he's waiting for all his preparations to backfire, for the whole house to come tumbling down. He pours himself two fingers of whiskey in search of steadiness. Again he glances, almost beseechingly, at the wicker chair. But Hannibal is gone.

Will fixes the dogs their dinner and they mill around the bowls in the living room, a little confused at dining here instead of in their usual place out on the porch. Will eats the last of the fish from his catch, and makes himself another drink. He is already approaching the limits of his patience for being indoors, and the night has barely begun.

He can hear the wind now. It gives a sly whistle as it buffets the roof. The dogs hear it, too. Their necks snap to and fro, their legs skip, nails clacking on the wooden floor as they try to locate the source of these strange sounds, the sounds of an intruder in their midst. The storm has hit. Will puts his whiskey glass on the floor and sits with them, speaks to them, does his best to assuage their fears.

When they are somewhat calm again, Will lies back on the floor and stares up at the ceiling, listening to the rain and thinking. Bedelia du Maurier's letter weighs heavy on him, for reasons he can't explain, can't admit. Beverly's email weighs heavy, too. He realizes he never replied to it. He doesn't really know how. There is too much to say, and not enough.

After Will gutted Hannibal he couldn't go back to Wolf Trap because Wolf Trap was a crime scene, and because he had known even then that he would never be returning there, not for any reason. So Beverly, brave Beverly, had taken him in, him and his seven dogs, all of them living together inside her apartment in Alexandria.

Will quickly became the houseguest from hell. Not only because his dogs grew restless in Beverly's smallish apartment and began destroying her nice furniture, but because Will himself was impossible to live with. He barely spoke, experienced screaming nightmares, and there were many days when he couldn't make himself get out of Beverly's futon bed. Bev would be forced to feed and walk the dogs herself, to tiptoe around him while he slept with his head beneath the covers in the middle of her living room, and if he was expected for a meeting back at Quantico, she would have to physically drag him upright, make him put on clean clothes, and prod him out the door with her.

Bev handled all of this with her typical class and good humor. Even in his blackest moods she wasn't afraid of teasing him about his frequent inability to talk about anything that wasn't related to the dogs, and the strange habit he had developed of always staring at the corduroy armchair in the corner of her living room. What Beverly didn't know—and what Will never told her—was that the big armchair was where Hannibal tended to sit when he paid his visits. This was the period when Will, if he stared at Hannibal hard enough, could always make him fade away. So Beverly would often walk in on him while he was in the middle of these staring contests, and her mouth would quirk, half in amusement, half in concern.

Sometimes she managed to get him outside: for a walk in the woods with the dogs or a night at the movies. But it was hard for them to go out in public, not only because of Will's depression, but also on account of the twenty-four hour news cycle. Flocks of photographers followed them around Quantico, and sometimes journalists even showed up at Beverly's front door. Over time, under that scrutiny, Will began to feel like a prisoner inside Beverly's apartment. She inadvertently strengthened this association by coming home most days with a bag of takeout for him.

It was a one-day-at-a-time arrangement. He wasn't thinking about his future. At least, he wasn't conscious of himself thinking about it. But there was a cold and clinical part of him always thinking, forever planning. He had not yet been successful in eradicating that aspect of his personality.

Jack kept bringing him in for post-mortem meetings in which Will had to explain himself to people higher and higher up the judicial ladder, gray-faced men in dark suits who all had questions about how Will had known where Hannibal was hiding, how he had convinced Jack to let Will go into the house in Wolf Trap alone, how the attack on Hannibal could possibly be in self-defense when Will had managed to cut him nearly in half. Will reacted badly to these insinuations, and became less and less communicative the more meetings Jack made him attend.

He had trouble with the insinuations because he was worried they were true. Three weeks after Wolf Trap, he found himself sitting next to Jack in a dark conference room and assuring the FBI Director point-blank that, in suggesting the Wolf Trap operation to Jack, it had never been Will's intention to kill Hannibal Lecter, even though Will was feeling pretty certain it had always been his intention to kill Hannibal Lecter. He had walked into that house hoping for his chance, and he had got it, and he was furious with himself for having fumbled it.

Jack sensed some of what Will was feeling. It was a feeling they shared. So after this meeting, he pulled Will aside and gently delivered to him the terrible news: the doctors were now sure that Hannibal would survive his injury, and when his condition improved, they were going to transfer him to the Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane. Jack thought this ironic arrangement would provide Will with some comfort. But Will wasn't comforted. He was furious. That was the last place Will wanted Hannibal to live: in a cell full of memories they shared. He did not want to be able to visualize Hannibal's prison in such precise detail. It made Hannibal seem closer to him, more present in Will's mind than ever. And here was Jack, trying to *cheer him up* with it?

In a trance of impotent rage, he drove back to Alexandria, walked into Bev's living room, and was completely unsurprised to see Hannibal in the big armchair, waiting for him. Will dropped on to the futon and engaged in his usual staring contest with Hannibal, straining the muscles of his mind until they throbbed, but for the very first time he was unable to make him go away. He knew, right then, that he was stuck with Hannibal forever.

Will did the only thing he could think to do. He raided Beverly's liquor cabinet. He didn't actually think alcohol had the power to make Hannibal disappear, but at least it could make Will care a little bit less about seeing him. He lined the bottles across the coffee table and poured himself martini after martini, staring at Hannibal as he gulped them down. By the time Beverly came home from the lab, Will was so drunk that he was actually talking to Hannibal, shouting at Hannibal, shouting at the empty chair.

If Beverly was upset to see him like that, she hid it well. She sat down on the futon next to him and tipped herself a glass of straight vodka. And via the magic of Beverly and many spirits, they were soon loose and laughing together. Goofing off with the dogs. Comparing their matching splints. Will pointed out that his was actually a cast, not a splint (with that single wrench, Hannibal had broken Will's wrist in three places) and Beverly suddenly insisted on signing it. They tore her place apart, scattering the puzzled dogs as they searched for a Sharpie, and once Beverly found one, she began drawing little smiley faces all over Will's cast. He watched her do this, appreciating the look of loopy intensity on her face, and over her shoulder he became aware of Hannibal in the corduroy armchair watching him darkly, smiling the scalpel smile, and suddenly Will was placing his good hand at Bev's jawline, toying with her hair as he covered her mouth with sloppy kisses, surging forward to press her back against the futon cushions—

And Beverly pushed him away, her eyes wide, upset.

She laughed it off an instant later. Joked about how that was the universal signal for closing time as she scooped up the liquor and put herself to bed. She was as understanding and forgiving as any friend could be. Nonetheless he was completely mortified.

He curled up on the futon feeling wretched. Woke up before dawn feeling even worse. It wasn't just the hangover. Hannibal was sitting right next to him, watching him.

"Well, well, well," said Hannibal. "That was painful."

Will had yet to deprive Hannibal of speech, though here was more evidence that he really needed to do it, and soon.

"Go away," Will whispered.

"Another clutch for balance?"

Will dragged a pillow over his face.

"No," said Hannibal, smiling faintly. "Not this time. Nothing so simple as that."

"Please… go…"

“You know you’re not harboring romantic feelings for Miss Katz. You are incapable of experiencing romantic feelings at the moment. You may never be capable of experiencing them. Damage can have that effect.”

Will pressed the pillow into his face as if trying to smother himself, smother Hannibal.

“The one good thing left in your life, Will. The only good thing. And you premeditate an attack on it. I’m sure Miss Katz believes it was in the heat of the moment, but you and I both know it was anything but. You made your entreaty in cold blood. Very cold blood. How long had you been planning it?”

Will said nothing, too choked with hatred.

Hannibal was looking at him with wide sad eyes. “You no longer have me around to destroy your life, so you are forced to do it for yourself. Isn’t that right, Will? Ah, Will. What’s ever to be done with you?”

Will blindly reached for his empty liquor glass on the side table and threw it at Hannibal. It flew right through him and shattered against the wall; luckily Beverly was too passed out to hear it. But it had the right effect: Hannibal took offense at having his incorporeality so blatantly demonstrated and disappeared instantly.

Just Will now. Will and his pain.

When Beverly woke up the next morning, Will stayed huddled in bed. She paused in the living room for a long time, silently deliberating as she looked at him curled up underneath the blankets with a sleeping dog on either side of him. Then she noticed the shattered glass. In total silence she cleaned it up, threw the broken pieces away. But she didn’t try to wake him, and that was all Will needed to know about where they stood. The instant she was out the door, Will had packed his bags, gathered the dogs, and left. He drove out of Virginia like someone was chasing him—driving south, and south, and south, until he ran out of south to drive.

Now Will lies on the floor, listening to the trees rocking against his hurricane-assaulted house, feeling furious with himself.

Maybe du Maurier knows what she’s talking about. Maybe what Hannibal feels is love. Who is Will to judge? He doesn’t understand love, not really, not with the painful verisimilitude with which he understands murder. Of course through his empathy he can experience love, just as he can experience anything; he can catch the spark of love from someone else’s flame, but he doesn’t know how to kindle those fires in himself. Maybe the closest he will ever get is this metastatic obsession with the mass murderer who has destroyed his life.

He envies Hannibal, that's the problem. Hannibal who is consumed by love, Hannibal who risked and lost his freedom for a dream, a slender chance at companionship. That fateful evening Will had sat in Hannibal's office, looked at himself through Hannibal's eyes, and in a blast of light and music and color he had been possessed by Hannibal's love for him, he had breathed it in and let it fill him up until he ached with it—and then he had walked out of that office ready to exploit that love with a frigid ruthlessness he now cannot purge from his system, because that ruthlessness wasn't something he ever learned from Hannibal. That ruthlessness was Will's alone. He had used it to push Beverly away. Now he uses it against himself on a daily basis. He doesn't feel love. He uses love. He has weaponized it.

These thoughts have achieved exactly what Will expected them to. They have summoned Hannibal. He is back in the wicker chair. But he is not the good doctor any more. Now he is dressed in Will's own clothes and bleeds copiously from a stab wound in his abdomen.

The wind increases to a howl. Rain pours down the shutters, thunders on the roof. It is strange to be able to hear such a violent storm but not to see a single sign of it, boarded up as he is inside this coffin of a house.

Will ignores Hannibal, ignores the pleading look in his eyes. He sits up and sees that the dogs are really panicking now. Violet's nerve has failed. She barks and barks, whines and cries, tries to hide under the kitchen table. Will pours himself his third glass of whiskey before crawling after her. He crouches under the table and bundles her up in his arms.

"It's all right," he whispers into her fur. "I know it's loud. And scary. But it will all be over soon. It's just a storm. Atmospheric disturbance. Rain and wind. Sound and light. You're safe in here. You're safe with me. It will all be over soon."

He rocks with her as she whines and whines. Her distress is still unsettling the other dogs. Skittishly they run from room to room, knocking against the walls, maddened by the terrible noises emitted by Violet inside the house and by the storm outside the house.

And Will realizes, with a sinking heart, that he is going to have to restrain Violet. He carries her to the laundry room, where he keeps the cage he used when he first took her in. Violet, despite her habit of hiding in tiny spaces, doesn't like the cage, and immediately starts struggling in Will's arms, whining at an even higher and fiercer pitch. But Will still locks her in. Tries to ignore her pleading eyes, as Violet looks at Will through the bars like he is suddenly not her friend but her jailer. Oh, how he hates putting living creatures into cages. No one can survive for long inside a cage, no one should have to. Why is it necessary? Why must it be?

He goes back into the living room. Hannibal is there. Thankfully his intestines are back inside his body; the good doctor is in session again, his suit dark and pristine.

Hannibal's eyes track Will as he crosses the room, scoops his glass of whiskey off the floor and finishes it. Pours himself another. The lids of Hannibal's eyes slip downward, disapproval emanating out of him in waves.

"Oh fuck off," says Will, downing it in one as if that'll show him.

He has forgotten that he isn't supposed to talk to Hannibal. He is drunk, intensely drunk. The adrenaline-fueled clarity engendered by the storm has worn off, and now he feels it, boy does he feel it.

As the dogs huddle in the kitchen corner, ears pricked and listening as the storm rages on, Hannibal sits in leonine silence with his brow creased.

"Disappointed in me?" Will sneers. "Well, I'm sorry. I guess I'm not up to your high standards after all."

He pours himself another, even though he knows this is getting really irresponsible. He's in the middle of a hurricane and he has the dogs to look after.

But with Hannibal's dark eyes on him, he can't help himself. He knocks it back.

"I don't know why you have to look so surprised," he says, and he can hear the way his voice has gone slurry. "You predicted this. Right down to the letter. You said I'd die if I tried to live this life. And I am dying. But we're all dying, Hannibal. At least I'm doing it on my terms. What do you have to say about that?"

Hannibal, of course, says nothing. But the look of disapproval intensifies on his face. His throat bobs and his eyes brighten.

"Well, I still think you're wrong. You've always been wrong about me and I'm going to spend the rest of my life proving it to you. I'll live this life even if it kills me. Just to spite you. How about that?" Will rolls his hazy eyes at Hannibal. "Now don't look at me like that, buddy. If I'd run off with you like you wanted me to, things would be so much worse. I'd probably be dead by now. You'd have killed me or I'd have killed you or we'd have killed each other. There would have always been that linoleum knife between us. Don't deny it."

Hannibal can't deny anything, but his eyes have narrowed. Meanwhile the dogs are looking at Will, confused to hear him talking so loudly and passionately to the empty air.

Will comes forward, drink in hand, swaying slightly as he closes the distance between himself and Hannibal.

"In the end, you just don't know me that well. Your love blinds you to the truth of me. You convinced yourself that I was something better than your mirror but you know what, Hannibal? Your mirror is exactly what I am. We're both just…accidents. Broken molds on the assembly line. And the day we were made there was no foreman there to catch us, no quality control to excommunicate us from the human race, so here we are, forever forced to mingle, even though we don't belong. You've coped with it by turning your isolation into your strength, your loneliness into your power, but in the end, you're not superior to anybody. You're not God. You're just one of Nature's many mistakes. A sadist and a narcissist. Nothing original. Just a lonely monster who can't acknowledge his own smallness in the scheme of things." Will chuckles to himself, knocks back the rest of the whiskey. "And so am I."

The rain pounds. The wind screams. The floor is swaying. Will drops to his knees to stop it.

“Just a mirror cracked from side to side. A palimpsest with your handwriting all over it, and I tried, I tried to erase as much of it as I could, I defaced your work, but I think I might have done too much, I erased parts of myself in the process. Is that why you’re looking at me like that?”

For Hannibal’s stare is more forceful and forbidding than ever; he seems almost to be growing taller in his seat as he stares down disdainfully at Will, who is now on his hands and knees on the floor in front of him.

“You’re tired of me,” Will says. “Isn’t that right? The shine’s worn off. Well, you know what you can do about that. What Bedelia du Maurier predicted you’d do. Go, then. Plot your escape. Seek out your next victim.” He spits this next out viciously: “If you want to leave me, then leave me. Be my guest.”

Hannibal’s blinks are slow, lizard-like, but his hands have tightened around the arms of the wicker chair.

“Why can’t you leave me? Why can’t you go?” Will crawls towards Hannibal as he speaks. “I don’t want you here. I don’t need you any more.”

Hannibal tilts his head, slowly, dubiously.

“I could do this. I could live this life if you would only let me. If you would take your claws out of me and go. Why can’t you go?”

Hannibal just blinks at him.

“Tell me. Talk to me. Please. Please talk to me. Talk to me again. I want you to talk to me.”

Will has crawled all the way to Hannibal’s knees. He stops there and looks up at him, waiting, pleading. But Hannibal just looks down on him, unforgiving.

“Please. Please talk. I need you to talk. Please.”

He is breathing raggedly. He looks up at Hannibal and waits. The storm howls and bashes, as if trying to tear the house right off the earth.

But Hannibal does not talk. Hannibal doesn’t even move.

“Please,” Will whispers, one final time.

Now Hannibal turns his head, slowly, meaningfully. His eyes flicker towards the desk drawer.

The letter. Will has forgotten all about the letter.

But of course, he hasn’t forgotten. How could he forget? The ruthlessness that thinks and plans endlessly on a low hum in the back of his mind has been preparing him for this moment all the time. He needed those drinks. He needed this storm. He needed to be trapped with no escape.

He sees the manipulation for what it is. Doesn't care.

He scrambles unbalanced across the floor, pulls at the desk drawer, but it is locked. For fuck's sake, why did he lock it? For a long moment he can't remember where he put the key. It's in the car. He doesn't want to go out to the car. He'll have lost his nerve by then. Instead he just pulls and pulls at the drawer, hammers at it with his fists as the dogs stare and Hannibal smiles.

The lock breaks. Will pulls the red envelope from the drawer, rips the flap open, and dumps Hannibal's letter out on to the floor. For a moment he stares at it. This is paper Hannibal has touched.

He tears it open. Pulls out three smartly folded sheets of heavy writing paper, covered in neat script from margin to margin.

He can hear his own tight, terrified gasps for breath. Tries to ignore them as he spreads the sheets of paper out on the floor and bends over them to read:

> Dear Will,
>
> So here we are, trapped inside our respective prisons. Mine I do not occupy by choice, but yours is a prison of your own making. Does that make it easier or harder to live in, I wonder?
>
> I don't find it easy, living in the Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane. I don't know how you stood it, being endlessly submitted to such mistreatment, poked and prodded and forced to hear you own story told back to you in the most reduced and inaccurate terms by cretins and half-wits. I have renewed respect for you, Will, for your endurance and your patience. In moments when my strength is tested, I play at being you, and I find my circumstances easier to bear. On the day I write this letter, I have officially been inside this institution for 253 days, the same length of stay as your own. We are, for now, the same. Tomorrow will be uncharted territory.
>
> I have long desired to write to you, but have restrained myself for various reasons. The most obvious is that I know this communication cannot be private, and I find it vulgar to think of the dirty hands of unwanted eavesdroppers scratching at my words for insight into my mind, and into yours (Hi Jack! My love to the wife!) but this is a necessary evil, and one I am willing to overlook for the time being. However, on account of those extra sets of eyes, I have found it prudent to include within this letter statements that bear no resemblance to my true thoughts, but I know you are keen enough to separate out the wheat from the chaff.
>
> There are other reasons why I have delayed writing to you. I admit I was angry with you for a very long time. I won't pretend that as I recovered from the wound you gave me, and continued to suffer from its lasting effects, that I didn't wish to revisit all of the pain and humiliation back upon its maker. I would have very much liked to see you cope with

the indignities of a colostomy bag. I am still unable to eat meat of any kind—and I need not explain how demeaning and inconvenient a state I find that to be.

My, but you knew what you were doing. Had I been first to the hilt of that knife, I would have merely used it to cut out your heart. You were more creative, and punitive, in your vengeance. But I should have expected nothing less from you, Monte Cristo. Your literary forebear was of the belief that the punishment ought to fit the crime, and here I am, betrayed and brought low by illness and suffering, languishing in this dull asylum with a bunch of unimaginative lunatics as my only companionship, unable to seek out even the simplest of pleasures.

I carry many scars now, Will. So many scars that you have given me. I have you inscribed here, and here, and here. I never shall forget you. But it grieves me to think that you carry no scars in return. You are clean, and unmarked, and bear nothing by which you might remember me, your greatest friend. But then I remind myself: your scars are all on the inside.

I forgive you for what you did to me, Monte Cristo. I cannot deny that you were justified in your actions, and I respect them, as I revere the imagination that gave birth to them. You had me hoisted on my own petard, and how can I be anything but impressed? I think back to what transpired between us inside your Wolf Trap, and I find myself wondering how much of what I saw there was real. I replay my memory again and again; I scrutinize it with the eyes of a forensic investigator, searching for the truth. You weren't lying to me that night, were you, Will? If you were lying, I would have known. You were simply telling me the wrong version of the truth. I find this thought to be of some consolation.

You should have come with me. We would have enjoyed each other's company, as we always have.

I can forgive you this wound. I can forgive you Wolf Trap. But there is something you have done that I cannot forgive. I can't forgive the damage you have done to yourself, and the damage you are no doubt continuing to perform upon yourself now that I am gone. You should have heeded my warning in Wolf Trap. But you dismissed my words unjustly before you ever heard them, to your detriment. Don't destroy yourself to spite me, I beg you. We don't invent our natures, Will. They are issued to us, along with our lungs and pancreas and everything else. You mustn't fight it. You were born with something beautiful, and to subject that beauty to willful destruction is a crime against nature, a crime against God, and even I can't forgive that. The thought of you putting all that potential to waste, knowingly, spitefully; I can't bear it. It gives me very good cause to hate you, Will. Be warned.

There is a passage I like from *The Count of Monte Cristo*. The Count receives a warning from his two new friends, the Baron Franz d'Épinay, and the Viscount Albert de Morcerf. The Count, you see, has just described his preferred method of revenge, "slow, profound, eternal torture." (Forgive me if I mistranslate, I am working from my memory in French.) His friends don't see the wisdom of his taking on the role of judge and

executioner. They warn him: “Hatred is blind, rage carries you away, and he who pours out vengeance runs the risk of tasting a bitter draught.”

So, Will, how did it taste?

I’m sorry. My internment has made me mean. An animal in a cage has no resort but to fall back upon its nature. There are days when I could tear this place apart with my teeth. I have no patience for mankind now that there are bars separating me from them. I abhor them more than I ever did when I was free. They try my patience. I am forced to find pleasure in little mischiefs. You no doubt think it crass that I have been speaking to Freddie Lounds. But if there is to be a circus, I must be sure to appoint myself its ringmaster. Don’t worry. Of course Miss Lounds tried to push me into selling you up the river, but I avoided answering any questions that might cast you in a negative light. I sang nothing but your praises, Will. As I always have. I may have bent the truth where I needed to, but I will make sure the whole world sees only the very best of you.

Oh, Will. These games I play here by myself are not enough. It doesn’t seem fair. When you were trapped within these walls, I visited you faithfully. We played a game together the likes of which I had never known, and may never know again. Oh, that game. I dream about that game. I have never been so profoundly happy and alive as I was during those precious months in which we sparred together. I know you feel the same way. Why can’t you pay me back in kind? Why won’t you relent, abandon your boat motors and return to me here in my little cell, so that our respective imprisonments might be made easier to bear? You won’t be able to resist forever. You will come back. Circumstances will force you. Jack will force you. You will force yourself. Come back to me, Will. Come back and play. There are times I fear I might die if you don’t. I might die if I don’t see you.

But then I remember: I don’t have to see you to see you.

Yours always,

Hannibal Lecter

The wind screams loud and long. In the distance, the sinister rumble of the ocean creeping up the shoreline, dark and swollen, as it encroaches on Will’s little house.

Having finished the letter Will sits up, his eyes locked in a nowhere stare. Hannibal Lecter watches him from the wicker chair, mouth tight and apprehensive, awaiting Will’s reaction. Will looks at him for a long time, face made of stone, betraying nothing. But then his face relaxes. He smiles minutely, a smile of gratitude, and Hannibal, his Hannibal, smiles back.

Will feels calmer now. He feels more like himself, more like Will Graham, having come however indirectly into confrontation with the man with whom he so often confuses himself. He knows only too well that he contains all the elements to make a Hannibal Lecter, all the elements except one. He sought those elements inside himself; he did it for days at a time while he was locked in his cell, perhaps the same cell in which Hannibal is sitting now. Will

brought those elements together, clicking them into place as if they were always magnetized, and by reassembling those pieces, Will slowly transformed his entire being into an agent of Hannibal's destruction. And now, after the time for vengeance has passed, he finds those elements still magnetized inside him, holding their shape with unbreakable bonds.

But these elements, these infernal elements, they never belonged to Hannibal. They cannot be purged or expelled. They belong to Will and always have. From the time he was born he carried them, unattached, unused, their jagged edges forever cutting him. But Hannibal Lecter helped him to connect them into something sleek, intricate and beautiful. A design. And there is comfort in understanding that design. There is strength there. Or at least there will be, some day.

Hannibal Lecter watches Will as Will stands up, clutching the letter at his side.

"You count doors," Hannibal says.

So he can still speak after all. Will is not surprised.

"I do," he says.

"You count the doors that lie between yourself and him."

"Him?" Will raises his eyebrows.

Hannibal repeats the pronoun demurely. "Him." Then, "Why do you count them?"

"Because it isn't many, when you think about it," says Will. "Seven doors between him and the outside world. They may as well be made of tissue paper."

A crease at the corner of Hannibal's mouth. "Too many doors, if you ask me."

Will smiles. "I'm not asking you."

"Are you counting up or counting down?"

Now Will frowns. "Obviously that depends on which direction I'm headed."

Hannibal shakes his head. "No. You maintain a count with the expectation that the figure you are measuring will either increase or decrease over time. Do you expect your door count to increase? Or to decrease?"

Will closes his eyes. Listens to the rain. "I'm counting down."

"To one?" Hannibal asks.

Will opens his eyes. Offers Hannibal a twisted smile. "To zero."

He turns away from Hannibal. He ferries the dogs into the laundry room, where little Violet has gone to sleep inside her cage. He talks to the dogs, strokes them and calms them, and then he closes the door of the laundry room and locks them in.

Back in the living room, he picks up Hannibal's letter and glances at it one more time.

He won't write back, of course. But he will write back to Beverly. She deserves a good long letter from him. He isn't sure he can give her that much, but he can at least put her fears to rest. The subject of her email had been from a Doors song, a sad song, a song about goodbyes.

Oh Bev, he thinks. *Don't you worry. This is not the end*.

He turns to Hannibal, who is still sitting in the wicker chair, watching him. "If you'll excuse me," Will says to him, "there's one door too many."

Hannibal simply nods. Back to speechlessness for now.

Will unlocks the back door. Removes the protective screens. Then, with Hannibal's letter still clutched in his hand, he steps outside to meet the storm.

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